MY SON IS GAY

An LDS Father's Journey Into Love and Faith

A NOVEL BY TONY CLARKE

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To all who trust in the Lord
and lean not unto their own understanding

CHAPTER 1

Mom, Dad, I'm gay," Ray read softly. Staring at the words, his throat tightened. Finally he softly queried, "What are these words doing here?" The words were *here* on the paper, but more inexplicably, the words were *here* in his life. Why?

Absentmindedly glancing around the cluttered room, his eyes stopped on a large black and white collage of his ancestors. Great-great-grandparents stared down at him in deathly silence: unsmiling, unyielding, uncompromising, judgmental. Their black-and-white eyes pierced his soul. *How did this come from your faith and sacrifice?* he wondered. *You gave up home and family to follow a new prophet. What did it get you? Mobbing, pain, loneliness, death?* His lips moved imperceptibly, "And now a gay great-great-great-grandson." He looked away, unable to withstand their gaze.

His eyes were next drawn to a picture of a young couple on their wedding day. The groom, in his black tuxedo, stood awkwardly. The small bride, wearing a flowing white dress, smiled as if every childhood dream had been fulfilled. Colorful flowers carpeted the ground at their feet while the temple shimmered in the background. The couple's eyes sparkled with the eternal possibilities sealed upon them moments earlier.

Ray's eyes dropped again to the discolored piece of paper, actually several pieces of paper held together by Scotch tape, that he still held in his hands. "Mom, Dad, I'm gay. You've been wonderful parents. I love you, and I don't blame you for anything. But, I need to share something that you know nothing . . ." Ray

continued carefully down the page as he read each word, though he knew the letter by heart. ". . . Your loving son, Eli."

"May I come in?"

Ray looked up at his wife standing in the door of the study, a tissue in her hand. He didn't want to talk, but beckoned her in with a nod. Then he noticed her eyes. "Looks like you've been crying."

"I have been," she admitted reluctantly. Entering the room, she dropped heavily onto the couch. Although after six children Roberta was only slightly bigger than the bride in the picture, the couch seemed to sag under the weight as she sat down. Wiping her eyes she looked at her husband, "I just finished talking with my mother. She still thinks we're far too lenient with Eli. Especially since we helped him move in with his partner."

Gently placing the letter back in the drawer, Ray looked at his wife, "Honestly, I'm surprised your parents even talk to us."

"Only mother talks to me. Dad hasn't said a word since he found out. We probably should have told them about Eli before the picnic."

"You're right," Ray agreed. "Although, we hid Eli's secret from them for over a year; guess we thought they'd never know."

"Now, in contrast to my parents," she smiled weakly, "your mother knew Eli was gay before we did."

Ray chuckled, "Yes, and my mother feels we're too intolerant and judgmental. Just last week she suggested we encourage Eli and his partner to have a commitment ceremony." He paused and slowly ran his hands through his thinning hair. "Try as we might, we can't please everyone."

"No, we can't," Roberta dabbed her eyes again. "But who should we try to please? My parents or your mother? Or do we please Eli? What about God? Oh, Ray," she sobbed, "why can't everything just be the way it was?" Ray stood and started pacing. He felt, no, he knew, that he had the answers to her concerns, answers that could calm her storm-tossed life. But she hadn't accepted his excited explanations a month ago, so why would she now?

Between sobs Roberta continued, "Ray, I can't go through another day; I'm empty. It's been more than a year since Eli told us, and I still don't know what to think, where to turn, what to do. . ." Softly she finished, "Or how to quit beating myself up."

There was a long pause as Ray struggled to verbalize his own worst fear, "Am I a horrible father?"

Roberta wouldn't hear it, "No, you're not a horrible father. You're not to blame," she insisted. Ray knew what was coming next as she whispered, "I'm to blame."

Ray stared out of the window, wondering if he could simply vanish into the night. Although it was pitch dark, he could hear the fierce wind and the pounding rain. "Who's to blame?" he muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Who's to blame?" he repeated louder, then turned and faced his wife. "God? You? Me? Society? When I returned from the support group that I attended with David, I thought I had all the answers. But you keep raising questions; now I don't know if what I heard was true. Was Eli born gay? Is it impossible for him to change? Has science found the 'gay gene'?"

Roberta, who'd been listening as if in a trance, motioned for Ray to stop. She gathered a notepad and pencil from the desk and settled back onto the couch. "For months we've talked about finding answers, but I'm not sure we've ever identified the questions. Now, go ahead and ask your questions."

"Okay," Ray began thoughtfully, "is there anything more important than just accepting Eli the way he is and loving him unconditionally?"

Roberta stopped writing, "Unconditional love bothers me—it's so permissive."

"What other love is there—conditional?" Ray twisted his lips into a phony smile and spoke with feigned sweetness, "We love you, Eli, but only if you get out of the gay lifestyle and attend church." Throwing up his hands he hissed, "You know that'll never work."

Dismissing his sarcasm, Roberta continued, "What about charity, Christlike love?"

"Isn't unconditional love and charity the same thing?" Ray grumbled.

"I don't know. So *that's* a question: do we love Eli with unconditional love or with Christlike love? I do know that I don't feel comfortable with the lifestyle."

"Tell me what's wrong with the lifestyle?" Ray demanded. "And, while you're at it, tell me why the Church won't accept Eli as the person he really is?"

Roberta looked up, "He *really* is a son of God."

"Will you please quit interrupting me?" Ray frowned, but then added sincerely, "That is an excellent question: who is Eli? Is he a gay man, a son of God, or both? Are you ready for more questions?"

"Yes."

"Okay then. Will the Church ever change its position on same-sex marriage? Is it fair that Eli can't marry someone he loves?"

"Hold on," Roberta interrupted, "some things have nothing to do with fairness. What about morality? Does God set moral standards or does the world?"

"But—" Ray began.

"Please let me finish," Roberta insisted. "To me, the critical questions are: what does the Church teach about homosexuality? Do we believe the prophet speaks for God? Do we follow the prophet even though he doesn't seem to have as many answers as the world? What about faith: where does our faith fit into the discussion?"

As Roberta paused to catch her breath, Ray quickly summarized, "It appears that for us, the most important question is how we should respond to our son. Do we become advocates for his rights, love him, and ensure he is treated with fairness and equality? Or do we follow the prophet?"

Roberta glared at him.

Ray stared back, ready to counter her faith-based objections. But she didn't respond. "I won't fight you tonight," she finally whispered. "Any more questions?"

After writing down a few final questions, Roberta leaned back on the couch. "Thank you. I feel better, like we've taken a step in the right direction."

Ray forced a laugh. The message of the support group he'd recently attended with his neighbor had been simple and easy to understand—love your son, fight for his rights, accept him as he is. Now, this conversation had raised questions that he felt were irrelevant and impossible to answer. He felt confused and frustrated again. "Now what?" he demanded.

"Do what the scriptures say," Roberta volunteered, holding up the sheets of paper. "Study these questions, make decisions, then pray for a confirmation."

"We've already done that!" Ray exploded. "We've both fasted and prayed for months and gotten nothing. I learned more at the support group last month than I've learned from a year of praying."

Roberta's shoulders sagged, her red-rimmed eyes filled with pain. Instantly Ray regretted his comment. Looking away he muttered, "I'm sorry. Honestly, I didn't mean to hurt you . . . again." Ray's pain deepened with each muffled sob. Eventually he spoke, "I'm sorry, but your approach to finding answers is wrong. Homosexuality is more than a pray-for-an-answer issue. It's complex. It encompasses many issues, like equality, rights, love, Eli's happiness. Ultimately though, it's about accepting things that can't be changed."

Roberta glared at her husband, "That's where *you're* wrong. It may or may not be complex, but in the end, it's a moral issue that God understands. If you'd humble yourself and finally make a commitment to God, He'd bless you with the answers you're looking for."

"You still think God has all the answers?"

She nodded.

"Maybe you're right, but I don't think it's that easy." Ray looked at his wife, "You do know I love you?"

"I know you do, but your criticism hurts." Her eyes were full of resolve. "Remember, I'm not to blame for your confusion. Maybe your approach is wrong. When will you stop taking your frustrations out on your family?"

Ray turned away from her gaze, "I'm sorry. I guess I'm tired of blaming myself, and I feel a need to blame someone." He wiped his eyes and turned to his wife, "I think the rain's stopped. Would you like to take a walk?"

"Not tonight, I'm tired."

He helped her up, gave her an awkward hug and kiss. "Sleep tight."

"Good night."

Outside the air was fresh and invigorating. Ray, still upset at himself, took a deep breath. As he rounded the corner of the house, he confronted a brilliant moon shining through a break in the clouds. Moonbeams reflected off the parked cars, danced on the rainwater flowing down the gutter. Once before, Ray had seen a moon as big and as bright—it seemed like an eternity ago, before all the pain and frustration. His mind drifted back to a warm spring morning 13 months earlier, the last time he and his wife had spontaneously laughed together.

CHAPTER 2

"Wow, look at that!" Roberta exclaimed.

In front of her, rising out of an undisturbed patch of white sand, was a colorful climbing wall. "This is great!" her husband shouted excitedly. "Of all the toys to find on a cruise ship. . . ." Holding hands, they strolled through the patch of warm sand.

"What do the colors mean?" she asked.

"According to this sign," Ray replied with authority, "they represent different routes to the top. Guess which route is the easiest?"

Roberta rolled her eyes, "Aaah . . . the blue one?"

Oblivious to her mocking tone, he continued, "The pink route is the easiest—it's for woman and children." His eyes brightened, "Race you to the top!"

"It wouldn't be a fair race."

Ray stared at his wife, "Why not?"

"Because you're over 50. If I beat you, you'll be mad."

"Ha, you're just jealous. Anyway, I'm not that much older than you, Miss 29-and-holding."

"At least I walk every day. You sit in front of your computer all day crunching numbers."

"An engineer doesn't crunch numbers, he creates useful masterpieces." Grabbing a handhold just above his head, he playfully taunted, "You're afraid, that's why you don't want to race."

"I don't think we should," she cautioned. "The sign over there says no one is allowed on the wall without a crewmember present."

Ray let go of the hold and looked in the direction she was pointing. "What sign?"

"The one over there by that couple."

"The man and the woman?"

"No, the two guys holding hands."

Ray stepped away from the wall and squinted, "I see the guys, but I don't see a sign."

When Roberta didn't answer, he jerked around. *Where is she?* Frantically looking, he glimpsed his wife halfway up the wall.

"No you don't!" He leaped up, grabbing a hold two feet above his head. As he pulled up, he planted his foot on another hold and pushed. Hand, foot, push, pull, he reached the top just after his wife.

"I beat you," she gloated. "Old men are so slow!"

"You cheated," he gasped between breaths.

"You're just a sore loser."

"Whatever."

Turning his head, Ray gazed over the top of the climbing wall. The unobstructed view took his breath away: below everything pulsated, bright and vibrant. Even the ocean sparkled as if it were alive. "This is beautiful," he whispered reverently. "This is the most beautiful . . ."

"Hello, world!" Roberta hollered. "You're beautiful!"

Ray jerked around. "Shhh," he cautioned. "What if someone hears you?"

"I don't care who hears me. I've never felt better."

Ray had to agree. Life *was* good. "You know," he observed thoughtfully, "the only blemish on this moment are those two guys holding hands."

Roberta gazed down at them, "They look comfortable with their situation."

"They ought to be, they chose it," Ray stated with authority.

"Aren't some men born gay?"

"I don't know." he replied with much less certainty.

"What about your brother? He's gay. Was he born that way?"

"Beats me," Ray shrugged. "I've never asked."

Roberta faced her husband. "Why don't you ask him some day?"

"You know that I love him to pieces, but I hardly ever talk to him."

"Why not?"

"Because he's gay and I'm not," Ray confessed. "We live in two different worlds. I never know what to say to him."

"Okay," chirped Roberta, "let's ask those guys holding hands why they're gay."

"Are you crazy? If I won't ask my own brother, why would I ask perfect strangers?"

"Because you want to know?" she responded with a sly smile.

Ray shook his head in disbelief, "Seriously, I want to stay as far away from them as I can. I feel the same towards my brother, Steve."

"I understand," Roberta agreed. "I don't feel that comfortable around Steve either. I have to hand it to your mother and sister, though—they've always supported him."

"My mother and sister certainly love him. I don't think dad would've put up with it. Probably a good thing that he died before Steve told us."

"True," Roberta nodded. "I'm just glad we'll never have to face that issue."

"Right on," Ray agreed, "I'm not sure either of us could deal with a gay son or daughter."

Without warning Roberta darted down the wall. "Race you to the bottom!"

This time Ray was ready and followed right behind her. "I got you this time," he gloated, as he dropped the last 10 feet to the soft, white sand.

"Cheater! You're a cheater!"

"Ha!" Ray laughed. "Look who's calling the kettle black. How did I cheat?"

"The rule book says you have to traverse the full height of the wall."

"I did," Ray was proud of himself.

"You can't drop," she insisted.

"Show me section and verse."

"I can't. The book's at home."

"You can't because the rule isn't there," he chortled.

"You'll get yours."

"And who, Mrs. Roberta Neels, is going to give it to me?" Ray shouted over his shoulder as he started to run.

"Remember," she shouted after him, "Cheaters never win!"

* * *

"Sir. Sir!"

Ray felt a tap on his shoulder. He shook his head, moaned, tried to remember where he was.

"Sir."

Opening his eyes, he found himself looking at one of the prettiest faces he'd ever seen. The face was speaking to him.

"Sir. Your friend asked me to deliver this to you."

Ray sat up. "A friend? Deliver what?"

"This drink, sir. Your friend asked me to deliver this drink. It will help you cool off." With that, she gracefully knelt down and placed a fancy-looking glass next to where Ray sat. As he watched her, he didn't notice the burly crewmember holding a large bucket standing next to her.

"Thank you . . ." Ray's heart stopped, his mind froze, air exploded from his lungs as the burly guy drenched him with gallons of ice water. Screaming, he jumped up, but the girl and her accomplice were already out of sight. Only then did he notice that everyone around the pool was looking at him. Most were laughing. He looked for his wife, "the friend" who he was sure had sent the drink. Although he couldn't see her, he knew she was somewhere, enjoying every minute of his drenching.

He smiled, then started to laugh. *I'll show her. I'll just down the drink she sent as if nothing happened*. He picked up the

beautifully decorated glass and ceremoniously drank half of it in one large gulp. Again, his body reacted wildly. The drink was so sour, he immediately spit out what he hadn't swallowed. Again, he noticed people laughing at him. This time though, because of the sour taste in his throat, he couldn't laugh with them. Faking a weak smile, he slowly picked up his wet towel and walked off.

* * *

Ray shook his head at Roberta as they sat down at the dining room table. "I can't believe you'd do that to me. My own wife."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes you do."

"But, didn't you say that a friend sent you the drink? I'm not your friend, I'm your wife."

"You're right about not being my fr—"

"Hello, I think this is our assigned table. Mind if we join you?"

Ray looked up to see an older couple standing next to him. "Not at all." He stood, extended his hand, "I'm Ray Neels, and this is my soon-to-be ex-wife, Roberta."

"We're the Lundgreens, Boyd and Camilla," he replied with a smile. Then his brow wrinkled and with a concerned look added, "If the two of you have something you need to discuss privately we can come back later."

Roberta laughed. "No, no. You're fine. Sometimes my husband overreacts."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

Boyd helped Camilla sit down, then looked at Ray, "There's one husband on this boat who has every right to leave his wife."

Now it was Ray's turn to furrow his brow and look concerned, "Really?"

"We heard the crew talking about it earlier. It seems this guy's wife had someone throw a bucket of ice water on him—while he was sunning himself, no less."

Camilla looked lovingly at her husband. "If that husband had a weak heart like Boyd does, something like that could kill him. What would cause a wife to do that?"

"Maybe he cheated in a race," Roberta volunteered with a smile. Ray bit his lip as they continued to discuss what the husband must have done to deserve his icy bath.

Soon, two younger couples joined them at the table. The food was delicious and the conversation relaxing. After a while, the discussion turned to children. Boyd and Camilla complained about the challenges they faced raising their two sons. Neither of the younger couples planned to have children—too much work and sacrifice they said.

Ray, though, couldn't say enough about his children. He talked about his married son and daughter and their growing families. He bragged about his son who had recently returned from an LDS mission and the other three children still at home. Although the wallet-size picture he passed around was far too small to see any detail, it allowed him to continue bragging.

After the meal, Ray and Roberta held hands as they slowly walked the length of the ship. Turning a corner near the stern, they encountered the brightest, most beautiful moon they'd ever seen. Moonbeams danced on the ocean waves and reflected off the ship's polished surfaces. Clouds on the horizon appeared alive in the light. They stood motionless, feeling the soft breeze on their faces, inhaling the misty ocean scent. Ray pulled his wife close. He couldn't remember a time during their 27 years together when he'd felt more satisfied.

* * *

As he brushed his teeth, Ray heard Roberta crying. Quickly he rinsed the toothpaste out of his mouth.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he entered the small stateroom. Roberta was sitting upright in her bed. As Ray looked around to see what had caused her tears, she handed him a sheet of paper, then crawled under her covers.

Ray started reading, "Mom, Dad, I'm gay."

He shook his head, swallowed hard. *What!* Fighting to maintain control, he looked at the piece of paper he held in his hand, slowly held it up to the light and began to read again, "Mom, Dad, I'm gay. You've been wonderful parents. I love you, and I don't blame you for anything. But I need to share something that you know nothing . . ." Ray's eyes skipped to the bottom of the page. "Your loving son, Eli."

The feeling in his stomach was much worse than the distress he'd felt from his earlier freezing bath. He leaned against the wall to steady himself, wondering if this was another of Roberta's tricks. "Is this some kind of joke?" he asked with a quiver in his voice. Roberta quickly pulled the blankets over her head and continued to sob. He tried to finish the letter, but couldn't read through his tears. Tearing up the letter, he threw the crumpled pieces to the floor and sat down on his bed.

Ray fought to control his thoughts, but his mind jumped from one emotion to another. Doubts, fears, and darkness sped through his consciousness. His mind began to focus on the gentle swaying of the floor, then abruptly jumped to a canoe floating down a gentle river. He closed his eyes and focused on the peace he'd felt four decades earlier as a Boy Scout. Suddenly he was drowning. In the rapids, his canoe had capsized. His body experienced again the sudden shock of icy water. He felt the air forced out of his lungs. Reliving the helpless feelings of water simultaneously filling his month and sucking him under, he tried to scream. He heard nothing. Blackness surrounded him. Then he felt his father's strong hands grab him. His eyes jerked open. To his horror, nothing had changed: Eli's letter littered the floor, Roberta softly sobbed under her blankets.

"Roberta," he quietly whispered. He wanted to feel her arms around him. He wanted to hold her as he had done earlier in the day, in the hot sun, with the sea breeze blowing in his face. Closing his eyes he focused on the physical perfection of that moment. In an instant he was a shirtless little boy learning to

ride his bike on a sunny spring morning. Then he was crying, covered in pain. Riding too fast, he'd lost control and ended up in Grandma Wilson's prize rose garden. He felt warm blood on his skin. Pain flowed from every thorn, thorns that dug deeper into his unprotected flesh each time he moved. As the scene went black he tried to scream but heard nothing. Then he heard his mother's voice, felt her warm, soft arms envelope him.

Feeling secure, he opened his eyes and stared at the pieces of Eli's letter resting on the floor.

Although he eventually fell asleep, his fears continued. He dreamed he was falling—a familiar dream that always began in the middle of the fall. Invariably, he would awaken quickly. But not this time. Tonight as he fell, he began to make out rocky ground racing up to meet him. The terror of his soft body splattering across the hard ground caused him to bolt upright. Tiny beads of perspiration covered his forehead: his body felt cold, his head throbbed, his neck ached. After a moment, he realized where he was, but he couldn't understand why the lights were still on.

Eli's letter, Ray remembered. Instantly he was awake. Roberta was still buried deep under her blankets and the crumpled pieces of paper still littered the floor. He thought of Eli, and the roller coaster ups and downs he'd experienced since his mission. Ray had been concerned about him but hadn't known what to do. Despite his best efforts, he'd had little success even talking with him.

"I must not be much of a father," Ray said half aloud. His mind raced as he attempted to sort out the feelings in his heart. Taking the family picture out of his wallet, he looked intently at Eli's face. His features hadn't changed: his eyes, his ears, his nose, his mouth, all looked exactly as they had only hours before. Unable to sleep, Ray dropped to his knees to pray. Crying, he finally fell asleep next to the bed.

CHAPTER 3

When Ray awoke, Roberta was gone. He couldn't see the crumpled pieces of paper. *Maybe it was just a bad dream*, he thought hopefully. Ray studied the family picture again and felt relieved as he confirmed that Eli hadn't changed. He wondered if he and Roberta had misunderstood the words of Eli's letter. Quickly completing his morning routine, he hurried onto the deck to find Roberta. The clouds, which had looked so beautiful in the moonlight, now covered the sky, replacing yesterday's vibrant colors with somber gray. The ship, so bright and shiny in the sun, was dull and lifeless.

On a whim, he headed off to the ship's library. They had found it on their first afternoon of exploring on the ship, and he remembered Roberta's comment that it was probably a good idea to provide someplace on the ship where a person could find a quiet place once in a while. As he opened the door, he saw a familiar figure sitting by herself. One look convinced him that what had happened the night before hadn't been a dream. On his wife's lap lay her Book of Mormon, a box of tissues, and the letter, carefully taped together. Her eyes were red. As their eyes met, he could see the next wave of tears rising to the surface. Ray pulled a chair next to her and sat down.

Ray often used humor when he didn't know what to say. This seemed to be one of those times. "When Eli said he was gay, he meant happy, right?"

She didn't move.

"Is there a big 'Just Kidding' at the end of the letter?" he continued with less enthusiasm.

She held the letter out to him and quietly said, "Here, you read it."

"I can't," Ray responded softly. "I couldn't get through it last night. I can't read it today. Please tell me what he said."

"He said he's gay. Remember the trip he took with his friend three months ago?"

Ray nodded.

"He told his friend how he felt and his friend told him he must be gay."

"I don't get it," Ray whispered, "Do feelings make you gay?"

"How should I know? Anyway, he doesn't blame us for anything. He said we're great parents and he loves us. But he feels he's a different person than we think he is."

Ray shook his head, "I don't understand. We've always been faithful, lived the commandments, served others. This kind of thing doesn't happen to families like ours. And Eli, he wasn't born gay, was he? He doesn't act like those guys we've seen holding hands on the ship. What makes him gay? Does one messed up friend saying you're gay make it so? If that's the case, then the first thing I'll say when I get off the plane is, 'You're not gay.' Everything will be alright, period."

"What *are* you going to say when you see him?"

"I don't know. . . . Get that stupid idea out of your head or something like that," Ray replied in frustration. "There's got to be a logical explanation for what's happening." But the more he thought about Eli's letter, the less sense it made.

Roberta interrupted his thoughts with a new fear, "What if my parents find out? They'll die if they know they have a homosexual grandson. They'll never talk to us again."

Ray knew she was right, "I've heard your dad talk about homosexuals. I don't know why, but he hates them."

"I'm sure Eli's heard his ugly jokes. Oh, Ray, I'm so afraid. What are we going to do?"

"Honey, it's okay. No one on the cruise seems bothered by the men walking around holding hands, so we're safe on the boat. And your parents never need to find out."

Roberta wiped her eyes, "How could this happen to us? We've always kept the commandments. I don't think a day—"

"Listen," Ray interrupted excitedly. "Remember me telling you how much I loved Scouting? How I went to Scout camps long after I should have moved on?"

"I remember, but what does that have to do with Eli?"

"Maybe nothing, but just listen for a minute. Anyway, I always enjoyed Scout camp, working with the leaders, being part of a group, living in a tent. At my fourth or fifth Scout camp, during the waterfront activities one morning I had an experience I've never shared with anyone. I saw a boy with blond hair down to his shoulders. His facial features were soft, his nose pointed. He was thin, athletic, and graceful. I couldn't take my eyes off him. As I watched him laughing and enjoying the activities, I wanted to be part of his group.

"As I stared at him my stomach began to churn, and I had to throw up. But I couldn't do it at the waterfront, not in front of all the other Scouts, and especially not in front of that boy. So I clamped my mouth shut and held it until I got to a fire pit."

"That's so gross."

"Throwing up wasn't as gross as how I felt about myself. I hated myself. I thought about that boy and my feelings towards him all day long. I was exhausted when I went to bed that night. I'd always felt a bit different from other boys. I liked art and disliked sports. I always got along well with boys my age, but I never had a close friend. My younger brothers always seemed to be part of a group. Occasionally, I'd tag along with them, but I always felt silly because I was older.

"I remember tossing and turning in my sleeping bag. I knew that I'd always been attracted to girls, not boys, at least not until I'd seen that boy. In fact, I'd had a crush on the same girl since third grade. She had long, blonde hair, a nice smile, soft features,

a pointed nose. She was skinny and athletic. I'd been in awe of her since the first time she'd beat me in a foot race."

"What's your point?" Roberta asked, wondering what this had to do with Eli's letter.

"My point is that I wasn't attracted to that boy because he was a boy. I was attracted because he reminded me of this girl. I remember that I was so relieved when I understood the reason for my feelings that I fell right to sleep." Ray paused, "That's so weird."

"What's so weird?"

"That night at camp was the first time I ever dreamed I was falling. Last night I had the same dream." Ray closed his eyes and spoke slowly, "There must be a connection, although I'm not sure what it is. Anyway, the answer to Eli thinking he's homosexual is to sit down and reason with him."

Roberta's quiet words interrupted his thoughts, "And while we're reasoning with him, how should we treat him?"

"He's our son, isn't he? And, we love him; . . . don't we?"

"That's right," she smiled, "We do love him; we'll follow the Savior's example and love him."

"We'll love him while we help him sort through his feelings; we'll love him more than he's ever been loved."

Roberta wiped her eyes, "We'll love him, but not his behavior. Remember that Christ told the adulterous woman that He didn't condemn her but to go and sin no more. We'll tell Eli the same thing."

"That's excellent," Ray said excitedly, his frustration gone. "You've got the answer right there. I'm anxious to talk with Eli. With love and reasoning we'll help him through his challenge." Ray paused. He felt better. He knew God would help them as He had done many times before.

Roberta almost whispered, "I've been praying for Eli since last night."

"What'd you feel as you prayed?"

"I don't know. I just don't know." She looked apprehensively at her husband. "What if he really is gay?"

Ray rubbed his furrowed brow, slowly shook his head, "Then he's out of the house. No gay man is going to live in my house, even if he is my son." He watched as tears formed in Roberta's eyes. "Please don't cry," he begged, then added what he truly felt, "He's not really gay; everything will be okay." He reached for his wife's hand, but she was dabbing her eyes. Ray smiled, confident that with the Lord's help things would work out. Silently bowing his head as he'd done countless times before, he began to pray.

During the day the clouds grew darker, the wind blew harder. That afternoon the captain announced that a pressure zone had shifted, pushing a storm front directly across their route. He assured the passengers that the weather wouldn't disrupt their itinerary. Roberta didn't move from her secluded spot all day, not even to eat. Talking only made her cry, so Ray read and thought as he sat next to her. He rehearsed in his mind what he would say when he saw Eli. That evening neither of them felt particularly hungry; they silently munched on snacks in their stateroom before going to bed.

* * *

The weather was wet and cool as the ship pulled into port the morning of the third day. Ray and Roberta went ashore with the other passengers but soon returned to the ship. They weren't prepared for the cooler weather, nor did they have much interest in the fake culture and cheap trinkets the locals proffered to the tourists. They remained in their stateroom until Ray became so agitated that he had to get out.

As he emerged on deck, he was startled at the monochromatic grayness surrounding him. The ocean reflected the dark, low clouds stretching to the horizon. Although the rain had stopped, the deck was still wet. The air was cool, even exhilarating, but Ray felt a deep uneasiness.

As he looked over the railing at the gray, choppy water, he remembered an old black and white movie he'd seen as a kid.

The movie—about a lone, unarmed transport trying to elude a submarine—had focused on three sailors. Throughout the show, they stood together, gripping the railing, watching the low gray clouds, the rainsqualls, the choppy waves. Waiting for the inevitable torpedo, they talked about home and family. The movie had already shown the horrible affect the death of each man would have on family and friends back home. Watching the three men calmly die, Ray remembered feeling that they were far better off than those who continued to live.

Now, leaning against the polished chrome railing, Ray fully expected to see a torpedo racing towards him. *Grow up!* he told himself. *You're not going to die*. In his mind, he knew he would in fact live, but he was fearful of the challenges that lay ahead. One last time, he looked long and hard for the onrushing torpedo, then turned and began to walk.

Ray enjoyed walking. He enjoyed the freedom. To him walking was almost a religious experience, an opportunity to think and ponder. On this day, Ray found the sheltered side of the liner and began walking fast. He spied two men, one short, and the other as tall as a pro basketball player ahead of him, and set out to catch them. As he got closer, he saw the shorter man take his companion's hand and squeeze it. Ray immediately slowed down, feigning disinterest in the two men even as he studied every nuance of their interaction.

After holding hands for a while, they put their arms around each other. Then the basketball player ran his fingers up and down his partner's neck. They played with each other's hair and whispered in each other's ear. Ray soon realized he didn't have to feign disinterest—they were unaware of everything around them.

"If that were a man and a woman ahead of me, I'd imagine they were madly in love," Ray spoke softly to himself. "So, are those two guys madly in love? They appear to be attracted to each other; at least they can't keep their hands off each other.

But do they satisfy each other's emotional and physical needs? Do they bring out the best in each other?"

Ray noticed several other men on deck, and checked his own feelings for even a small physical attraction to any of them. He felt nothing. "So why are those two attracted to each other?" As he continued to talk to himself, he imagined Eli as one of the two men ahead of him.

"Oh, excuse me," the basketball player said as Ray bumped against him with his arm.

"No, it's my fault," Ray replied, hoping they hadn't heard him muttering. "I wasn't watching. Please excuse me."

"Don't worry about it, son; have a nice day."

"Thank you. Good day to you." Turning, Ray brushed off the sleeve of his jacket and hurried away.

* * *

That evening Ray and Roberta felt good enough to try the main dining room again. They hoped a good meal and stimulating conversation would raise their spirits. While they enjoyed everyone at their table, they felt especially safe with one of the older couples. Positive and energetic, the couple looked like the perfect grandparents with their white hair and infectious smiles. They'd traveled extensively and seemed tolerant and loving. Parents of four children and grandparents of 13, they shared many of the same values as Ray and Roberta. As they talked lovingly about their posterity, Ray and Roberta began to relax and feel comfortable again.

A major topic of conversation was the negative impact of the inclement weather. Each of the other couples had gone ashore that morning, but all had returned to the boat early in the afternoon. One frail-looking man who had been on several cruises observed that the current weather was the worst he'd experienced. "Although," he added, "the weather is nothing compared to the homosexuals I've seen holding hands on this ship. Since the day we left port it's been nothing but—"

Without warning, the loving, white-haired grandma and grandpa jumped into the conversation. They talked about homosexual men they'd encountered during their travels, describing in horrible detail the things they'd seen and heard. Ray glanced at Roberta, who sat looking straight ahead, clinching her jaws and fighting back tears.

"They should put every homosexual in America on this ship," the white-haired grandmother said with conviction, "and sink it in the deepest part of the ocean."

Unable to endure more, Roberta jumped up. Knocking over her chair, she dashed sobbing from the room. All conversation in the dining room stopped. Ray struggled to explain Roberta's sudden exit, but all he could do was glare at the couple. He wanted to hurt them as much they'd hurt Roberta. He wanted to scream out his loathing for them, but no words would form in his mouth. Slowly he stood, his fists clenched, perspiration beading on his forehead. He leaned forward against the table that separated him from the kindly couple. A soft whimper escaped his lips; turning, he slowly walked out.

Going onto the deck, he faced the full fury of the storm. Mindlessly, he walked to the railing. Grabbing it with both hands, he leaned into the wind: a solitary figure looking out to sea. The torpedo he'd anxiously looked for earlier in the day had exploded. He hadn't even seen it coming, but he felt the searing pain as the shrapnel dug deep into his soul. Now, wet and tired, tears mingling with rain, he pleaded with God for a sign that someone cared. He didn't know what he expected, but his mind kept reflecting on his father's strong hands, his mother's warm embrace. The storm intensified. Shivering and shaking, he waited and waited. Feeling nothing, he finally went inside.

CHAPTER 4

The doorbell rang twice.

"Honey," Roberta hollered from down the hall, "Please see who's at the door. I'm in the middle of a seam."

Ray, slowly rose from his old, worn recliner. As he headed for the door, he wondered why the American Psychological Association hadn't yet classified sewing as an addiction.

"Jessica, how are you?" Ray exclaimed, surprised to see his sister standing on the front porch.

"I'm fine. How was your cruise?"

"Fun, we had a blast!" Ray lied.

"I heard the weather was bad and the boat came home early." Jessica smiled.

"Technically speaking that's right, but we did receive a nice voucher for a future cruise. You know, bigger and better."

"So, when will you take that cruise?" she inquired. Before Ray could answer, she continued, "I heard you vowed never to take another cruise in your life."

"People can change you know. We'll go again, someday."

"Well, if you don't use your vouchers, let me know. I have no problem with the whole cruise scene."

"I'll remember that," Ray laughed. "Let me get Roberta."

"Jessica, how are you?" Roberta squealed as she hurried down the hall. "What a pleasant surprise. Why didn't you tell us you were coming? We'd have fixed you something to eat! Is anyone else with you?"

"Mother's in the car. She didn't want to get out until she knew you were home."

As Roberta and Jessica moved into the family room, Ray went to help his mother. As she slowly got out of the car, he reflected on how much he loved her. Life had been hard for her, but she had single-handedly overcome every challenge.

"How's Roberta?" she asked as Ray helped her up the stairs. "Is she still doing twice as much as everyone else?"

"Three times as much as anyone else, Mom."

"So, what have you been up to?"

"I'm still trying to recover from the cruise. We had a great time."

"That's not what I heard."

"What did you hear?" Ray inquired. "You and Jessica seem to know a lot about our cruise."

"I heard that the weather, among other things, ruined your once-in-a-lifetime get away."

"You're right. Honestly, it wasn't the best vacation I've ever had. But it was good to spend time with Roberta."

They sat down and joined in the conversation with Jessica and Roberta. Ray relaxed in his recliner and listened, grateful to have his mother and sister in the home. They didn't visit often.

"How's Eli doing?" Jessica asked.

Ray bolted upright in his chair as he and Roberta responded in unison. "He's great!" He settled back into the chair as Roberta told about Eli's plans for the future. "He wants to major in piano pedagogy," she concluded.

"Isn't it great!" Jessica declared with a smile.

"You're right," Ray added. "He enjoys music and gets along well with everyone. He'll make a wonderful teacher."

"No," she objected, "Isn't it great that he's gay?"

Ray thought he heard Roberta gasp, he felt his own body tense up and wondered how his mother and sister knew about Eli. Neither he nor Roberta had told anyone; they were both too afraid and embarrassed. And, after the experience on the ship,

they didn't trust anyone. He'd thought Eli felt the same way. His right hand gripped the armrest as Jessica continued speaking.

"Eli's so much happier now that he's come out. Whenever he comes to the house, we party. He's finally blossoming into the real Eli."

"How do you know that Eli's gay?" Ray asked as nonchalantly as his rapidly increasing anxiety would allow.

"Oh, he told us."

"He told you? So, who else has he told?" Ray fought to control the terror ripping through his mind—others knew!

"Well," Jessica continued, "he's told some of his friends and our brother, Steve. He may have told others."

Ray slowly exhaled. When they'd greeted the children at the airport after the cruise, Ray had made a special effort to talk with Eli. Although Eli had appeared to hold back, Ray had embraced him, softly whispering in his ear, "I love you." On the surface, at least, Eli appeared to be the same son Ray had known before the trip. At times he sensed a difference, but then he wondered what kind of a difference. Ray worried that he'd created the difference in his own mind because of the label Eli had affixed to himself.

He'd continued to visit with Eli, and up to that moment had felt hopeful they could solve things without others in the family knowing. Eli had been meeting with the bishop and a counselor at LDS Family Services. Ray was confident the counseling, prayers, and love would help Eli get over his misguided thoughts and feelings.

His mother's words interrupted his thoughts, "Eli was fearful before he came out. Now that his fears are gone, he's a new person."

"When did he tell you?" Roberta timidly inquired.

"A couple of months ago. After he told us, we encouraged him to tell you and Ray. He said he's still afraid to tell your father."

Roberta closed her eyesand moaned, "My parents must never know. Promise you won't tell them?"

"I won't tell them," Jessica promised. "And Eli won't tell them. He told us about your father's homosexual jokes, says he hates

his grandfather. It took all his courage to tell the two of you. He was scared you'd never talk to him again, or that you'd throw him out of the house."

"Really?" Ray blurted out, experiencing anew the gnawing feeling that he'd failed as a father.

"He's not really homosexual, is he?" Roberta asked with trepidation. Ray noticed tears beginning to form in her bloodshot eyes. His own eyes pleaded with his sister for help.

"Oh, yes he is," Jessica insisted, not recognizing her brother's desperate entreating. "He was born that way. He told us he's always felt different, that he's had to hide who he really was. But now he can be the person God meant him to be."

"Was he really born gay?" Roberta asked fearfully. "Is he . . . gay . . . because of me?"

Jessica looked sympathetically at Roberta, "Listen, sweetie, you're not to blame. You certainly had no control over Eli's sexual orientation."

"I don't think that's the answer," Ray objected. "At least, not the full answer."

"Science has proven that it's genetic," his mother replied, her voice calm and assured. "Anyway, look at it this way. Eli is one of six children; right?"

"Yes," Ray and Roberta replied in unison.

"All six children have been raised by the same parents in this very house, right?"

"Right."

"You treated each of your children the same?"

"We tried to be consistent and fair," Roberta said as Ray nodded his head, unsure where the questioning was leading.

"Every week you held family home evening. Every day you read the scriptures and prayed as a family. Every Sunday you attended church together, isn't that right?"

"Yes. Yes!" Roberta sobbed, "Yes!" She covered her face with her hands. Ray moved next to her, wrapping her in his arms. Her body continued to jerk with pain. He felt he was a failure as a hus-

band. He couldn't comfort the one person he loved more than any other. He couldn't protect her—not even from his own family.

"Please don't cry," Jessica begged compassionately. "You raised your children all the same, but Eli's different. God created him the way he is, and God loves him."

"I believe that God loves Eli," Ray responded in frustration. "He loves him enough to fix him."

"Is that what you pray for?" his mother asked.

"Absolutely, God can do anything He wants to do. He can fix Eli!"

"I'm not surprised you'd say that," his mother replied. She felt pity for her son, but felt she needed to be brutally honest. "For years after your brother, Steve, came out, I prayed that God would heal him. Nothing happened. After I read a book written by a faithful Christian mother, I understood why. This faithful mother believed everything her church taught about homosexuality—that it was a serious sin and that homosexuals were damned. When her only son came out, she was heartbroken. She wrote about the shame and pain he felt. She described her own suffering as she prayed and fasted for God to heal him. She took her son's burdens upon herself, reasoning that her own lack of faith kept God from making him whole.

"After years of struggle, she finally moved past what her church taught and learned the truth. She learned why God hadn't fixed her son. He wasn't broken. He was exactly as God had created him. God loved him just the way he was, and she needed to love him as God loved him. That helped me to understand why, in spite of all my faith and prayers; God didn't fix your brother. And when I finally moved past what our church taught, I was able to love Steve as God loves him. The sooner you understand that Eli is the way God created him, the sooner you'll be able to love him unconditionally."

"They're not sinners," Jessica added. "They're God's children. We need to love them as He does."

All in all, the evening was devastating for Ray and Roberta. Since returning home, the deep wounds experienced on the

cruise had begun to heal. Being with their children, especially Eli, had renewed their faith that everything would work out, that God would make things right. But now their wounds had been reopened, their faith destroyed, and their fragile hope shattered. With their objections repeatedly countered and ridiculed, Ray and Roberta silently conceded defeat. But their visitors continued to press. Ray wanted to fight back, to scream that they had no right dictating to him how to love his son, but he was powerless.

Later, walking his mother and sister to their car, Ray noticed the lights in the master bedroom go off. *No talking to Roberta tonight*, he thought. He felt relieved, because he had no answers and little hope to offer his wife. But he felt so alone—he needed her to cling to, to cry with.

After saying goodbye to his conquering relatives, Ray slowly walked around the neighborhood, trying to make sense of the evening's conversation. Barely able to see the sidewalk through his tears, he felt like a plucked chicken, slowly roasting over an increasingly hotter fire. While Eli had support, he and Roberta had none. While everyone else had answers and appeared confident, he and Roberta were confused. For a moment, he even wondered if what his mother and sister had said might be true.

As Ray walked, reasoning with himself, he began to feel again that he could figure things out. Nothing he'd ever experienced had been beyond his ability to eventually understand and control. Remembering the fear he'd felt the first time he'd dissected a frog, his spine stiffened. He'd known nothing about frogs, but had quickly learned. Eli's issues, he reasoned, were no different. He needed to dissect Eli's 'gayness'—open things up, identify the pieces, fix what was broken, and put everything back together. And, he knew God would help him. Envisioning the challenges that lay ahead, Ray felt energized. It had been a long time since he'd faced a real test. Although this was the first time that he, Ray Neels, had been the father of a gay son, he felt confident.

CHAPTER 5

Ray sat in his recliner and surveyed the family members gathering in the living room. His eyes rested on Roberta, who sat in poignant silence. Earlier they'd argued about Eli and now weren't talking to each other. He arose, walked over to her, and whispered in her ear. She forced a smile in reply. While attending the temple several weeks earlier, they'd felt a unique spirit and received specific revelation. The family gathering was one result of that revelation. Ray wanted each person to also feel the spirit he and Roberta had felt in the temple. *So, why do we continue to argue and drive the Spirit away?* He wondered.

Ray looked at the three children still living at home. They sat close together, excitedly discussing the farewell they'd attended that day. Ted would be leaving on his own mission in two months, breaking up the three musketeers. But Ray knew the children still at home would support each other. Bob and Lisa, although 22 months apart, were almost like twins, sharing between them numerous friends and interests.

Ray turned and greeted his oldest son, John, and his only daughter-in-law, Sharon. Although proud of their single-minded determination to complete college, he occasionally wished they'd start their own family. Right behind them was Mary, Eli's oldest sister. She explained that Mike had stayed home to tend their two children. Ray wasn't surprised—her husband had dramatically cooled towards the family since Eli's announcement.

Eli was the only child missing, and while he didn't need to be part of the gathering, Ray had prayed he would attend. He

wanted Eli to feel the Spirit and the family's love. Ray continued to believe there was a rational fix for Eli's feelings and hoped the family gathering might be the catalyst.

Moments after the opening prayer ended, Eli entered the room. "I brought along a few others," he announced, as his grandmother, aunt, and uncle followed him into the room. Ray was so happy to see Eli that he disregarded the feelings of concern he felt about the others.

After everyone was comfortable, Ray stood slowly and addressed his family. "Thanks for being here this beautiful Sabbath evening." He nodded towards his mother, brother, and sister, "And a special welcome to Grandma Neels, Jessica, and Steve; what a pleasant surprise to have you here." Taking a deep breath he continued, "Several weeks ago, mother and I attended the temple. We went expecting to receive inspiration to help Eli at this time in his life. While I was in the temple I did receive inspiration, but not for Eli. I left the temple with assignments from the Lord regarding things I needed to do for myself. One assignment was to have my sons give me a blessing. When I mentioned this to Eli, he was supportive. I know that he has visited with each of you about his feelings and attractions. I commend Eli for his courage and each of you for your Christ-like response."

Ray sat on a folding chair in the middle of the room as his two worthy sons laid their hands on his head. As John pronounced the blessing, Ray felt the warmth of the Spirit, a confirmation that God, the creator of worlds without number, knew what was happening in that small room. As the blessing ended, tears covered his cheeks.

Ray acted as voice as he joined the others to bless Roberta. As he held her close after the blessing, he felt they were again united. Several others received blessings, although Eli politely declined his father's invitation for a blessing. Ray continued to feel the warmth of the Spirit as he stood and expressed his love for his family.

"I'm so grateful for you. I love each of you. I know the gospel's true, that Jesus is our Savior. He lives. He loves each of us." Looking directly at his second son he continued, "Eli, I know that you're a son of God. He loves you. He'll bless you as you choose the right."

Eli returned his gaze.

"Dad, can I say something?" Mary inquired.

"Please do."

"Eli . . ." she paused to wipe her eyes. "Eli . . . I love you. You're a wonderful brother. Whatever you choose to do, I'll always . . . love you." Sobbing, she sat down.

Ray noticed others who appeared to feel as he did. *How can anyone doubt the Spirit? God surely—*

"If this is an open forum I want to say a few words."

Ray turned to see his mother stand up. His earlier feelings of concern returned.

"I keep hearing the word *choice*," she began. "Eli and Steve didn't have a choice regarding their sexual orientation. They were born to love men the same way the rest of us were born to love the opposite sex. Science has proven this. Their attractions are natural and holy and God given. They don't suffer because of their attractions; they suffer because of the way others treat them."

Ray listened, swept along by a feeling that he'd lost control. He'd felt a similar helplessness years before, when as a young Scout he'd capsized his canoe in raging rapids. The power of the current had smothered his feeble efforts to fight back. Now his mother's words controlled him as completely as the swift current had years before.

"Eli will feel better about himself when everyone quits saying, 'I love you no matter what you choose to do,' or 'I love you, but. . . .' Eli needs to hear his own family say, 'I love you just the way you are.' He needs to hear you honestly say, 'I love you for who you are. You don't have to—'"

"But he wasn't born gay," someone objected.

"He was born gay! I can prove it!" She retorted in a shrill voice.

"Be quiet! Please . . . just be quiet. Please!" Roberta sobbed. "I want my family to love each other, just love each other." She finished in a barely audible whisper.

Her words gave Ray strength to speak, "This isn't what I had in mind," he mumbled to his warring family. "In the temple, I had a powerful feeling that this would be a spiritual, unifying experience for us. I did feel the Spirit earlier, but it's gone now. I'm so sorry. Everyone go home."

* * *

Roberta laid down the book she'd been reading in bed, "Do you know what Mary told me as she left the meeting?"

Ray turned off the bathroom water and entered the bedroom still drying his hair, "No, what?"

"She said Mike won't allow their children in our home when Eli's here."

"Really?" He stopped drying his hair, feeling sick to his stomach. The orderly world he'd worked so hard to build over the years was crumbling, and there wasn't anything he could do to prevent it. He looked at Roberta, whom he depended on more and more, "How does Mary feel about that?"

"You know that she feels differently; she loves her brother. She and Mike have been arguing since they found out about Eli."

"Does that mean that we'll never get the whole family together again?"

Roberta sighed, "Maybe. Mary said she'd continue to talk to Mike. But she'll support his decision; she doesn't want her own family torn apart because of Eli."

Ray threw down the towel, "That's just great! Mike won't have anything to do with us now. Sharon agrees with my mother that Eli was born gay. She said homosexuality is natural and encouraged me to support Eli in his new lifestyle." Ray sighed, "By the way, did you hear what Ted said after the meeting?"

"I did," Roberta replied hesitantly. "I couldn't believe it, Eli's own brother calling him a pervert. I hope his mission helps him become more compassionate."

"He has a lot of me in him. I use to say jokingly that there were two ways to do things—my way and the wrong way. Ted thinks the same way."

"Sometimes you weren't joking. At least Ted didn't tell Eli to his face."

Ray nodded, "Thank goodness for that, but knowing Ted, someday he'll tell him, and Eli won't fight back."

"No, he won't. He's such a good kid, but he feels sad that everyone doesn't just accept him. Ray, are you sure Eli wasn't born gay?"

"I'm not sure of anything, but I think that's what the Church teaches. The world teaches men are born gay and therefore not responsible for their actions."

"If he's not born gay, how does it happen?" Roberta was looking directly at him. "What does the Church say causes homosexuality?"

Ray struggled to respond: it wasn't often he didn't have an answer. "Honestly, I don't know," he finally admitted. Throwing the towel to the floor in frustration he continued, "Maybe mom's got the best advice—love him, accept him, be happy he can be who he thinks he is."

"But he's not a gay man."

"He thinks he is."

"I know," she whispered as she pulled her blankets tighter around her, "and it makes me so sad."

"Why are you sad? Eli told me he's never been happier."

"The saddest day of my life," she sniffled, "was the day he announced he was gay."

"Why?"

"Because the Eli I love died that day." She closed her eyes and continued as if Ray wasn't there. "After the birth of each child, I'd lie in the hospital bed and imagine all the wonderful experiences

we'd share together. I'd imagine my daughters coming home after their first date, sitting on the edge of the bed, and sharing with me every detail. I'd imagine them tearfully telling me about breaking up with one boyfriend after another. Then I'd imagine that special moment when they'd tell me about the man they loved and about being a wife and a mother.

"I'd imagine my sons growing up as big, tall, hard-working, honorable men. I'd visualize the day they would receive the priesthood and the day they'd leave on their mission. I imagined each son after his mission giving me a big hug and telling me about the girl of his dreams, the girl he would marry. I'd imagine—"

"But honey," Ray interrupted, "Real life's so different than our dreams."

"True," she opened her eyes. Ray froze, overwhelmed by the anguish he saw. "But I've never forgotten the dreams I had for each child. And because of Eli's kind and loving nature, my dreams for him increased over the years more than for some of the other children." She glared at her husband, "Now those dreams are dead."

"But Eli's still a tall, strong, handsome, talented man. Why can't you dwell on the positive?"

"Why? Because he'll never be sealed in the temple, he'll never hold his own child, he'll never be with us in the celestial king . . ." Roberta bit her lip as her voice trailed off, trying unsuccessfully not to cry.

Wiping tears away she demanded, "Can't you understand, I'm grieving—grieving for Eli's loss; grieving for our loss. And I can't grieve in a healthy manner. I can't go to my mother or my sisters. I can't lean on my friends in the ward. I'm alone."

"What about me? Can't I help?"

"You're a man; only another mother can really understand my pain. Every time I look at him, I see a son of God who's been deceived. He's . . ." she sobbed uncontrollably.

Frustrated, Ray snapped. "Get a grip! You've cried for months, every day since the cruise! Roberta, listen to me! You can't spend

the rest of your life like this—the other children need a mother!" He took a deep breath, whispered, "And, I need a wife. *I* need someone, I need you, to lean on."

Roberta buried her head in her pillows and continued to sob. Angrily Ray jumped out of bed, scooped the towel off the floor, and stomped out. Arranging the towel as a pillow, he collapsed onto the living room couch. Crying, battered by conflicting emotions, he slipped into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER 6

The smell of bacon and eggs filled the kitchen. Ray sat at the table, still in his pajamas, his eyes scanning the sports section for baseball scores. The children had left for early meetings, making that Sabbath morning more peaceful than most. "I don't understand," Ray began, keeping his eyes on the newspaper. "I don't understand why we can't talk to each other anymore without arguing."

He sensed that Roberta was looking at him from where she was preparing breakfast. He didn't dare meet her gaze. She replied hesitantly, "After 27 years of marriage I thought we could talk about anything. At times, I felt as if I could read your mind. What's happened?"

Ray lifted his eyes from the paper. "Maybe we knew each other so well in the common everyday things that we forgot how to communicate. Maybe we've been on communication autopilot during the last 10 or 12 years."

"It's possible that's what happened," Roberta agreed. "Then, when Eli told us he was gay, we couldn't adapt and were forced out of our routines."

Ray chuckled, "I've slept the last three nights on the couch; that's certainly a change to my routine."

Roberta managed a weak smile. "To this point, we haven't done a very good job responding to the secret he shared with us. So, what do we do?"

"I don't know. Do we need to tell other people so they can support us?"

"Absolutely not!" Roberta commanded, her eyes reflecting a cold resolve. "Our children and your side of the family know about Eli, and the bishop knows about him. No one else needs to know, especially my family!"

"Why can't you tell anyone else? Your family will find out someday, so isn't it better if we tell them?"

"My family doesn't need to know," Roberta replied defensively. "No one else needs to know, period! This is our secret; it's going to stay that way. Eli's the one who told the bishop, not us. We've talked with the bishop several times, but he's been no help to us. Some members of your family feel we're bad parents because we don't love and accept Eli just the way he is. If we tell other people, they'll judge us as bad parents too. They'll reject us. They'll say something like that horrible couple on the cruise ship. I've never been so hurt in all my life. We don't know how people will respond, so we won't tell anyone. My goal is to continue to look like the perfect family we once were."

Ray smiled, "Months ago, Eli said he became a world-class actor in order to hide how he really felt. We're following in his footsteps."

"That's okay."

"Then we've got to be each other's number one support," observed Ray. "We need to listen to each other without judgment or criticism."

"That's right." Roberta glared at her husband, "And I need to be able to share my concerns and fears without feeling that I'll be put down or ridiculed by you." Ray, lowering his eyes, felt a migraine coming on. She continued, "If I can share what's in my soul, maybe I'll be able to understand my own fears."

Ray, not knowing how to respond, finally whispered apologetically, "I'm sorry I've been so critical since Eli came out. To protect myself, I've blamed everyone else for the situation. Now I'm trying to stop playing the blame game; it doesn't solve any-

thing." He paused, "I'm sorry I haven't been more Christlike in dealing with this challenge. Will you forgive me?"

Roberta wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, "I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me."

"What's to forgive? You've been a great wife and mother since Eli came out."

She rolled her eyes. "The other thing we must remember is that we have needs that can't be ignored. Our other children have needs. We must think about them and spend time with them. Life doesn't stop because one member of the family is homosexual. You and I should start going on our weekly dates again. We need to recommit to daily family prayer and scripture study."

"And start holding weekly family home evenings again," Ray added.

"That's right. Those activities will help the family as much as anything. And I personally need to improve in my own scripture study and prayers."

Ray shook his head, "If you're going to get personal, I'll join you in doing better at personal prayer and scripture study. When I need the Lord's help the most, I slack off in my efforts to be worthy. Honestly, my life needs a lot of improvement. Remember how quickly I'd get angry and yell at the children when they were younger? Now I wish I'd been more patient." He looked at his wife, "What affect did my weaknesses have on Eli?"

"I don't know," Roberta replied softly.

"He can't be gay just because of me," Ray said to himself, his voice rising. "It has to be more than just me. What about his brothers? I treated them the same . . . didn't I? I treated them the way I was treated. My dad took me hunting and fishing, I wanted my sons to have the same experiences. That's why I'd take each boy out fishing as soon as he was big enough to carry a small backpack."

Roberta nodded.

"I remember the first time I took Eli. Camping and fishing was all he had talked about for weeks." Ray spoke as if the experience had happened only yesterday. "I remember that we reached the lake in the late afternoon. The rain had just stopped and bugs were darting above the surface of the water. The fish were jumping. I fixed Eli's line and threw it in the water. Almost immediately a fish took his bait.

"I remember him shouting excitedly that he'd caught a fish. He reeled it to shore, but then didn't seem to want anything to do with the fish. He wouldn't touch it, and John finally had to clean it for him. I remember tears came to his eyes when we laughed at him and called him a 'fraidy cat'." Ray shook his head at the memory, "I did put my arms around him and told him we'd make a man out of him yet."

"Eli remembers that first fishing trip all too well," Roberta said softly. "He told me about it several months ago. I was amazed at how close to the surface his emotions still were. He said that as he reeled the fish in he couldn't help but notice how beautiful it looked. He described how alive and powerful it appeared in the water as it thrashed back and forth, struggling to get free. Eli didn't want to hurt it for anything, but he'd reeled the fish close enough to shore for his brother to net it. Watching the fish flop around on the net was so disappointing. There was none of the power and beauty he'd seen in the water, only jerky, desperate movements.

"When others yelled at him to kill it, all he wanted to do was cry. He felt responsible for taking it out of the water where it was strong and beautiful and free. He'd wanted to throw the fish back into the water, but someone had already grabbed it and was banging it against a rock.

"He remembers you handing him a knife and his brother laughing at him because he wouldn't touch the fish." She looked at Ray accusingly, "He still remembers you telling him you'd make a man out of him. He told me that during the night he laid in his sleeping bag, eyes puffy and swollen from crying, feeling

ashamed and different from his brother. Before falling asleep he promised himself that he would never, ever kill another fish."

Ray hesitated, "That explains why Eli hardly said a word the rest of the trip. You know, I don't remember him ever catching another fish."

"He told me," Roberta added, "that he only fished half-heartedly after that first time."

"I wish he'd told me about those feelings."

"Why? What difference would it have made?" she asked frostily.

Ray stood and began to pace slowly. After several painful moments of silence, he replied, "At that time it wouldn't have made any difference at all. I'd have told him to get over it—that fish were created to be caught, killed, and eaten."

Roberta listened intently, full of pity for the man she loved.

"But I don't think I was too hard on him," Ray objected more to himself than to his wife. "I treated him no differently than I treated his brothers. I took him deer hunting at the same age I took his brothers. We always ended up waiting for him though. He was more interested in taking pictures of rocks or flowers than hunting deer."

"And that's okay," Roberta interjected. "Not every boy likes to hunt and fish. Look at your sister's two boys. Their dad took them hunting and fishing before they were potty trained. But once they were old enough to choose, they quit going with him. Several young men in the ward have never been hunting or fishing, and judging from the flirting they do in the halls at church, that didn't affect their attraction to girls."

Ray stopped pacing, "I guess you're right." Staring out the window he continued, "I just realized that Eli never did shoot a deer, although he had several chances. He always seemed to miss. We just laughed at him and made fun of him. One time, a deer stepped right in front of him. The deer just stood and looked at him, so close that all Eli had to do was raise the gun and shoot.

But somehow he still missed. I've always wondered if he missed on purpose."

Ray looked at Roberta and asked, "As long as I'm beating myself up, would you mind listening to one more experience?"

She nodded for him to continue.

"This is a more recent experience." He started to pace again, lips momentarily pressed together, arms folded. "Several months before our cruise, I came home after priesthood meeting to get a red marking pencil to use in Sunday School. I almost knocked Eli over as I entered the house. I asked him in my sternest voice what was going on. He replied that he was heading to church. I pointed out that church was half over and that being late for church was absolutely wrong. I insinuated that he must have been a lousy missionary if this was the best he could do as a returned missionary.

"I remember him looking me in the eye and sneering, 'Dad, you have no idea what's absolutely wrong.' Then he turned and left.

"As I looked for my pencil I remembered thinking that there's no excuse for being late for church." Ray rubbed his temple, his headache returning, "You know, I've thought about that experience many times since. I've replayed that situation over and over in my mind. How I wish I could redo that one experience."

"Tell me what you'd do differently."

Ray sighed, "After Eli said, 'Dad, you have no idea what's so wrong!' I would have responded in a quiet voice full of love and concern. 'Eli, I sense you're struggling with something. I've been involved with so many things, I haven't given you the time or attention that I should have. I apologize for that. I love you.'

"At that point Eli would respond, 'I know you love me, Dad.'

"I'd put my arms around him, pull him close, and whisper, 'You're a good son, and I'm proud to be your father. I love you.'

"Eli would begin to cry and then say, 'Oh, Dad, I love you too.'

"Then I'd ask, 'How can I help?'

"'Dad, I need to tell you . . . about . . . a challenge . . . Maybe after church we can talk.'

"'No,' I would have insisted, 'Let's talk right now.'

"'But you've always said we shouldn't miss church for anything. You really want to talk right now?'

"'Son, it's more important to be here with you than to be in church. Is that okay?'

"'Dad, I've wanted to talk with you for so long. You always seem too busy. I've not wanted to bother you.'

"Then I'd begin to cry and I'd say, 'I'm so sorry. There's always plenty to do, but none of it's more important than you. I apologize again for losing track of my priorities. Please tell me what's bothering you.'

"'Dad, you're not going to believe this, but . . . .'

"Each time I relive the experience, this is the point where Eli would share his struggles. I imagine that we'd talk for hours, cry on each other's shoulders, then pray together. Eli would get the help he needed, and we'd never get a letter on our cruise that said, 'Mom, Dad, I'm gay.'"

Roberta objected, "Don't be so sure that talking would have solved everything. Months ago, Eli explained that we offended him when we returned from the cruise with our pitiful offers to help. He'd lived in hell for years fighting his feelings. He didn't tell us he was gay because he wanted help; he told us because he was finally convinced there was no help."

Ray nodded, then fell silent as he continued pacing back and forth. Roberta waited patiently. Finally, without looking at her he began softly talking to himself, "I remember going to the last concert of Eli's sophomore year. I'd missed the other concerts because of work or Church assignments. But I know he wanted me to attend that concert because he had a solo part. You stayed home with sick children.

"I sat where I could watch him. He kept glancing at me; I guess he was afraid I would sneak out. After playing his solo flawlessly, he looked at me with a big smile. I gave him two

thumbs up, just like I'd give his brothers when they'd make a great play on the basketball court."

Closing his eyes, he continued to talk, "After the performance, I gave him a big hug and told him how proud I was of him. Then I stepped back and listened to his peers talk with him. I sensed he wanted me to hear what they said. For the first time, I realized that Eli was as important to the orchestra as his brothers were to the teams they played on. I understood that his musical talents and skills where as meaningful as his brother's athletic skills.

"Then we went to the burger place—just the two of us, like I'd done with his brother after a game. Eli smiled and talked and laughed."

Fighting to control his emotions, he looked directly at his wife, "That was a perfect evening, not just because of what I felt at the moment, but because it held the promise of so many more similar evenings." Ray exhaled deeply, "But I never attended another concert. That was the only time I showed him and told him how proud he made me."

"You never told him again?" Roberta asked in disbelief.

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"I don't know." He turned away from her, "I thought he knew how I felt about him."

"How could he know?"

Ray shrugged, "My dad never said that he loved me, but I knew. Anyway, I didn't tell his brothers that I loved them either."

"But you spent time with them almost every day playing sports."

Ray covered his face with his hands, as if trying to block a left hook to his chin. Painful moans escaped his lips, and tears filled his eyes. Roberta watched with pity. Finally, in a hushed voice, he continued, "A couple of months ago, Eli told me the same thing. He felt I always had time to play basketball with his brothers, but never enough time to sit down at the piano with him. He said it made him feel like a second-class citizen in the

family. What he said was true. Over the years, whenever he asked me to play the piano with him, I always protested that I wasn't any good. I honestly felt that I'd only be wasting his time."

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he began to understand, "Eli didn't want a piano player sitting next to him . . . He only wanted his dad. That would have taken so little of my time and effort."

He buried his face in his hands. The pain consumed him. His body ached; he hated himself. How could he ever repent? How could he ever make things right? He hadn't intentionally meant to harm anyone, but the damage was there for the entire world to see. He, the perfect father, had failed. He'd failed Roberta, and he'd failed his children. How could he ever be forgiven? An eternity of suffering could never change what he'd done.

In between sobs the pain continued to spill out, "I tried to make him like me . . . but all he wanted was for me to like him . . . to give him a hug . . . show him he was okay . . . He wanted to be his own man . . . created in God's image . . . not my image."

Roberta watched quietly, her own heart breaking. She wondered if the pain would ever end. She moved to comfort him, but was driven back by his consuming anguish. Feeling powerless, she silently retreated, leaving her husband to suffer through his Gethsemane alone.

CHAPTER 7

Ray closed the door and entered a beautiful spring morning. But his mind, focused on one terrifying task, blocked out everything around him. As he marched across his dew-covered front lawn, he didn't notice the brilliant blue sky nor smell the fresh air nor hear the birds chirping. He stopped at the curb and looked across the street at the biggest house in the neighborhood. The yard was immaculate—trees, shrubs, grass, and flowers, perfectly arranged and proportioned. And to Ray, the family that lived in the house was as perfect as the yard.

Ray fought the fear churning his stomach. He looked up and down the street, hoping a car would appear so he wouldn't be able to cross. No car, no excuse, he had to go forward. He had to talk with the perfect father of the perfect family. And into that perfect world Ray was going to dump all his imperfections, guilt, and shame. Roberta had cried the first time he'd mentioned visiting with their neighbor, but as they discussed it further her thoughts shifted, and last night she'd strongly encouraged him. Despite that urging, when he invited her to go with him, she refused.

The perfect neighbor, who'd been toiling in his yard since sunrise, didn't notice Ray approaching. "Hi, David, how ya doing?" Ray asked, sounding as nonchalant as his pounding heart would allow.

Surprised, David looked up, "Oh, Ray. You startled me." He looked at Ray's outstretched hand, "I'd shake your hand, but you'd get this." He held up two hands covered with moist, dark

soil. "But if you care to, you can do some good with that hand; sit down and help me."

"Happy to help," Ray casually replied as he sat down on the damp grass and began to dig a hole for the small flower in front of him. "Gorgeous morning, isn't it?"

"It is beautiful. Got your garden planted yet?"

"I'll till it today, plant next week. Last year we planted everything earlier because of the cruise."

"Was your cruise a year ago? How was it?"

"We enjoyed the first day, sunny and warm. Then we sailed into a storm. The weather was so bad the ship returned to port early."

"That's too bad. Nancy and I went on a cruise a couple years ago. We'd go again in an instant. You just went the wrong time of year."

"I guess you're right," agreed Ray. "How's your family?"

"They're doing fine."

"Give me a rundown on each of your children."

"Ashley's expecting her second child," David said with some pride. "Dan's out of state attending college, still on the dean's list. Anne will graduate from high school this spring as the class valedictorian. Aaron turned 16 last month and already has a good job."

Ray shook his head. What he'd just heard didn't make the conversation any easier. "Your family's amazing. Dan must not date much if he's getting such good grades."

"Over the years he's dated quite a bit."

"Is marriage on the horizon?"

"Don't know, but probably not. There're some issues."

"Oh," Ray replied nonchalantly, bursting inside to know what the issues were. "Is Ashley expecting a boy or a girl?"

"A girl. That'll be two girls for her and Sam."

"Tell me about Dan. What's he doing?"

David looked at Ray. "Aren't you listening?" he laughed. "I told you he's attending college."

"I'm sorry; I did hear that. Tell me again what he's studying."

"He's in drama."

"Wasn't he in drama in high school also?"

"He was. Acting was always a great outlet for him."

"Dan's always been a great young man," Ray reminisced. "All your children are wonderful, but I associated more with Dan than the others. I was the priests quorum advisor when Dan was first assistant to Bishop Adams. He was more mature than the other priests in the quorum were. When he was in charge of the weekly activity we could always count on him. That's more than could be said for the other young men."

David nodded, "Dan was always dependable. But your comment about others not being as dependable reminded me of the times Dan would come home from mutual complaining about playing basketball."

"Didn't he enjoy basketball? He always played on the ward teams."

"He thought basketball was okay, but always felt there was more to life than sports. It just bothered him that basketball was always the default activity."

Ray suddenly felt guilty. When he'd worked with the young men, he was always quick to suggest basketball when a planned activity fell through. As he started to dig a hole for another flower, he realized that some of the priests might have intentionally not followed through on their assignments with the full expectation of spending the evening playing basketball. This thought made Ray uncomfortable. He'd come to David to get information, not to be reminded of his own failures. He'd already spent ample time dwelling on his shortcomings during the past months.

Refocusing, he continued, "What does Dan want to do after he graduates?"

"He loves to act, but I think he wants to write and produce his own plays. He's had some unique experiences in his life and sees the stage as a way to help others see life in a different way."

Perfect opening, Ray thought. His mind told his tongue to ask about the unique experiences, but nothing happened. He couldn't speak. The silence rang in his ears as he concentrated on digging a two-inch deep hole for the small flower in front of him.

"What's Eli doing these days?" David broke the silence.

Why's he asking about Eli? Ray wondered. *We have five other children, why Eli?* Panic stricken he tried to think of something to say. Since the cruise, he'd only thought of Eli as his gay son. Ray tried to remember what Eli had been involved in before his announcement. "He's going to the university," was the only thing he could remember.

"What's he studying?"

Ray again scoured his memory, "He's in the music program. He wants to teach piano. I think the official description is piano pedagogy."

"How far is he in the program?"

"He's a junior."

"I remember him playing in church," David reminisced. "Eli seemed to have a real talent for the piano. Do you remember that he took Ashley to several of the high school dances? She'd come home and tell us what a wonderful dancer he was."

"I do remember that," Ray laughed. "I know he enjoyed going out with Ashley. And my Mary went out with Dan."

"They did go on a number of dates, including several dances. You know, Nancy and I always thought Mary would be a wonderful daughter-in-law."

"Roberta and I thought Dan would be a great son-in-law. In fact, after Dan returned from his mission we prayed that he'd date Mary."

"That's never going to happen now," David mused.

"Why not?" Ray asked expectantly. He hoped this is what he'd been fishing for.

"Well, because she's married to another man."

"Yea, that's right," Ray responded without emotion. He was drained and hadn't accomplished a thing. He wanted to

say goodbye and go home. But, mustering all his courage, he charged forward, "David, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," David replied as he continued to dig.

"This is kind of a personal question. Promise you won't be mad at me?"

With this, David looked up, a quizzical expression covering his face. "Be mad at you? Why would I be mad at you?"

"Okay. Well, I . . . um . . . wondered . . . if, uh . . . um . . ."

"What is going on? Spit it out man."

Ray stared at the ground.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." After another long, uncomfortable pause, Ray blurted out, "Is Dan gay?"

David laughed, "Is that it? Is that your question? Yes, he's gay. Why are you asking?"

Silence.

"Is Eli gay?"

Ray looked at the hole he was digging and nodded.

David laughed. "Boy, you seem uncomfortable; you don't have to be, you know. It's okay if our sons are gay."

"It is?" Ray looked up, his eyes hopefully searching David's face.

"Sure, it's okay," David chuckled. "They're the way God made them. They're His sons. He loves them the way they are. And there's nothing that we need to be ashamed of."

"Really? I've prayed so hard that God would fix Eli."

"But He didn't fix him, did He? That's because there's nothing broken."

"That's what my mother said a year ago. Is it really true?"

"You bet it is. Hey, would you like to go with me to a support group for parents of homosexual children? You'll see that everything's okay. You'll understand Eli better and learn how to help him."

"I'd love that. For months, I've been confused. Can they can help me understand what's going on?"

"Absolutely, they've got answers. You and Roberta can go with Nancy and me. Pick you up next Tuesday around 6:30?"

"Count on it," Ray said enthusiastically, then paused. "Hey, David, are you sure that Eli was born gay?"

"Absolutely! Science has proven it."

"That's good to know. So . . . I'm not to blame?"

"Are you to blame?" David laughed. "No one's to blame."

"Thank you."

"Glad to help."

Ray almost floated home, excited to tell Roberta what David had said. He was relieved to know that someone had answers. "Roberta," he hollered as he entered the house, "I finally visited with David. It's just as we thought, Dan is gay."

"Is Dan the one who dated Mary in high school?"

"He is."

"Good thing they didn't get married."

Ray paused, "Yea, I guess it is. But Eli dated David's daughter, Ashley."

"You're right," Roberta's lips quivered. "Eli told me last week that even though he dated girls in high school he wasn't attracted to them. Why didn't we see that he had those feelings? How did we miss all his suffering during those years?"

"I don't know. I was always watching for signs that the children were involved with drugs, alcohol, or pornography. I never thought that one of them might be homosexual."

"Neither did I. Ray, do you think that if Eli had married Ashley, he wouldn't be gay today?"

"I don't know," Ray replied thoughtfully. "David said that men are born gay, claims there's scientific proof. And he's not as uptight and stressed as we are. Maybe he's right. He's invited us to go with him and Nancy to a parents' support group next Tuesday."

Roberta wiped her eyes, "I don't know? Can we trust what he says?"

"David's my high priests group leader; if I can't trust him, who can I trust?" He kissed Roberta softly on her forehead. "Anyway, think about it. I'm going outside to till the garden."

CHAPTER 8

Ray splashed cold water on his face, happy at what he'd accomplished during the day. His conversation with David had gone better than expected. The yard looked good. At sunset the gorgeous spring day had given way to a thunderstorm. His newly tilled garden would welcome the moisture.

Sticking his head out of the bathroom door he addressed his wife, "Roberta, Eli wants to bring Jeff next Saturday."

The lights flickered as a blinding brightness flashed outside the window, punctuated immediately by a thunderous explosion.

Roberta's response to Ray's comment was not as loud as the thunder outside but was every bit as penetrating. "No!" she adamantly yelled.

"Honey, please talk quieter," Ray begged as he entered the bedroom. "These walls aren't soundproof. You don't want to wake the children."

"But we can't allow it," Roberta's response was softer but still laced with resolve. She sat in the middle of their bed, arms folded. "I won't allow it!"

Ray let out a sigh. "Listen," he said patiently. "All Eli wants to do is bring Jeff to the family picnic."

"Which one is Jeff?"

"I think he's the one with the light-brown hair that we met last month."

Roberta rubbed her forehead as if deep in thought. "I think I remember Jeff," she said without opening her eyes. "He seemed like a nice enough kid."

"Honey, it'll be fine," Ray said hopefully.

Looking up, she demanded, "Where does it end? I was beginning to make peace about this whole issue. Eli has kept his 'gayness' low key."

"Out of sight, out of mind?"

Roberta glared at her husband, her lips quivered. "It was one year ago today that we learned Eli was gay. Everything good in my life vanished with his announcement."

Ray stopped, "You're being too harsh."

"You're right. Since then Eli hasn't gone out of his way to cause trouble." Roberta paused, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. "He does go to those activities with his new friends."

"Have you ever asked him about them?"

"Not really. I think I'm afraid of what he'll say. I can only imagine what goes on." She looked at Ray, "What do you think they do?"

"I can't even think about those things."

"Out of sight, out of mind?" Roberta asked smugly.

Now it was Ray's turn to glare at his wife. She continued with no hint of apology. "He dresses differently, and you know how his hair looks. But I've learned to live with those things. It bothers me that he stays out so late. My biggest struggle though is when he brings home his boy friend—and I use that term loosely—to meet us."

"But, we've always encouraged the children to bring their friends home."

"That's true. And we all sit around the table, eat, and talk about whatever the children want."

"The girls talk about boys."

"I know. But as the girls grew older, they'd bring the boys home, and we'd do the same thing." She smiled at Ray, "And you'd always grill our daughter's dates."

"You bet I did," Ray quickly agreed. "I wanted to know what kind of young men were dating our daughters. Did you notice

my subtle warnings about how the young men were to treat our daughters?"

"I noticed you weren't very subtle at times."

"That's okay. They needed to know what was expected. When I met our children's friends I often wondered about their level of romantic interest."

"I wondered the same thing."

"But then," Ray responded haltingly, "Eli comes home with a male friend. We get out the same snacks and we talk, but it's not the same. I can't get out of my mind that Eli's friend may have a romantic interest in him. Or worse, that Eli may be the one with the romantic interest."

Roberta's lip began to quiver again, "I've never wanted his boy friends in our home. Then I think of the positive influence we can have on Eli and on his . . . boy friend. But while they're in our home, I just want to scream at his stupid friend to get out of here! To get away from my son!" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, "I want to treat Eli's friends like the other children's friends, but I can't. The unnatural relationship clouds everything else."

Ray sat on the edge of the bed. "I understand, but Eli's a grown man; he can choose his friends. I think David was right this morning that Eli didn't choose to be gay."

"I don't know about that, but he can choose his behavior." Roberta paused, fighting to control her emotions. "Anyway, you say that Eli is moving in with Jeff. And they both want to come to the family party next Saturday?"

"That's right."

"We can't allow that," she announced.

"Can't allow Eli to move in with Jeff?"

"No, as you said, Eli's a big boy; we can't tell him where to live. But if he has to bring Jeff to the family party, we can tell him not to come."

"Oh great, and what does that accomplish?" Ray was surprised at his wife's resolve. This was harder than he'd thought it would be.

"We protect the other children."

"True, but that means we may never see Eli. We won't be able to tell him we love him, won't be able to give him a hug. What influence do we have on him then?" He looked directly at Roberta, "You'd turn your back on your own son just because he wants to bring a friend to a family party? Did you ever think that maybe Jeff hurts as much as Eli, that maybe he needs our love also?"

Roberta closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. She knew Ray was right. "But what if they do something stupid like hold hands or kiss?" Roberta demanded. "What impact will their actions have on the younger children? We've got to think of them also."

"You're right. We can't forget the younger children . . . or the grandchildren." Ray took his wife's hand. "Months ago, Eli told me he would never do anything to hurt his younger brothers or sisters. Let's trust him. While he's lived with us, he's done most of what we've asked. His bedroom is the cleanest room in the house. We told him not to bring pornography into the house and he hasn't."

Roberta shifted her weight on the bed, then let out a long sigh. "I think he's brought pornography into the house. I've seen him looking at magazines that look pornographic to me. But he does keep them hidden. I think the new romance novels he reads are pornographic enough."

"Why didn't you kick him out?"

She scowled and folded her arms again, "You know life's not black and white anymore. In my heart, there are huge gray areas that make this issue so hard. I didn't say anything to Eli, because I thought the love of the family and the spirit in the home could help him."

"That's my point exactly," Ray replied hopefully. "Let's give him and Jeff the benefit of the doubt. I'll even talk with them about what we expect when we're all together as a family."

"Okay," Roberta replied slowly. "You do know that if Eli and Jeff are at the picnic, Mike won't let his family come. At the same time, Sharon will be encouraging them to hold hands."

Ray let out a long sigh of his own, "We'll pray for our family. Maybe God can change their hearts. I know I can't."

"You're right, God can . . . oh no, no, no!" Roberta's eyes widened, full of terror. "Oh no . . . Ray, we invited my parents to the picnic. If they think for a minute that Eli and Jeff are more than just casual friends, I'll never see them again."

Ray closed his eyes, shook his head, "I'd forgotten about that. Let's ask your parents not to come Saturday."

"We can't do that."

"Then, we'll ask Eli not to come to the picnic."

"That won't work. Ray, what can we do? My parents will say something like the couple on the boat, only it'll hurt so much worse because I love them. And I love my son. What do we do if the picnic becomes a shouting match like the family meeting? If my father says anything critical to Eli, his siblings will defend him and attack their grandfather. What do we do?"

"We trust in the Lord. I don't know what else we can do other than simply trust in the Lord."

Neither spoke, both overwhelmed by what lay ahead. Finally, Ray timidly broke the silence, "Eli wants us to help him move Monday evening."

Although Roberta was beginning to recognize that there were some areas of gray in her life, what a person did on Monday evening was still black and white. Monday evening was a time to be together as a family, not move people. "Why move on Monday?" she demanded. "Is he forcing me to choose between family home evening and him?"

Ray laughed, "No, silly, Monday is the only day he has off."

Roberta took a deep breath, "Remember the show we watched last week?"

"Fiddler on the Roof?"

"That's the one. Remember that the milkman, Tevya, maintained a balance in his life through his traditions? Then, one by one, his traditions were stripped away. His oldest daughter chose whom she'd marry, even though she'd been promised to

the butcher. Tevya adjusted. His second daughter chose to leave her family and go to the man she loved in Siberia. Tevya again adjusted. But when his youngest daughter chose to marry a non-Jew, Tevya couldn't adjust."

Ray nodded in agreement, "That choice cut too deep into his traditions. He drew a line in the sand."

"Exactly, and right now I feel like Tevya. When Eli told us he was gay, he asked that we love and accept him. We did. Eli brought his male friends home, and asked that we welcome them. We did. Now Eli is asking us to help him move in with a partner. He wants us to accept them as a couple, and allow them to attend family activities together. We . . . no . . . *I* am struggling with that right now. Who knows what will happen in the future? Eli could ask us to campaign for same-sex marriage. He could ask us to attend a commitment ceremony for the two of them. He could ask us to support them in adopting a child. Is there ever a point when we draw a line in the sand?"

Ray, the man who felt he could wrap his mind around any situation, sat dumbfounded. When Roberta realized that he wasn't going to respond, she continued, "Tevya had tradition to hold on to for balance. We have the Church, but there's so little material about homosexuality. Even after a year, I'm not sure how homosexuality fits within the gospel. I'm still not sure what gospel principles should guide our actions—love, faith, mercy, justice? After a year of fasting and prayer, I still don't have any answers. My fear is that I'll never understand."

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart," Ray quoted. "And lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

"I'm trying to trust . . . but my faith is weak," Roberta confessed. "Honestly, right now, I don't feel God knows I exist. And what about tomorrow? If I help Eli move, am I enabling him? Am I encouraging him to be involved in his new lifestyle?"

Ray moved next to his wife and put his arm around her. "We've gone out of our way to show Eli we love him. Helping him move is just one more way of showing our love."

"I understand. But what kind of an example am I setting for the other children?"

"You're showing them that you love all your children. They know you'd do the same thing for them that you're doing for Eli."

As she rested her head on his shoulder, Ray gazed at the rain beating down the leaves outside the window. In his mind, he knew that storms always blew over, that the darkest night always turned into day. After talking with David that morning, and now, seeing Roberta willing to bend a little, he felt renewed hope.

Roberta, taking another deep breath, realized it wasn't yet time to draw a line in the sand. She slowly exhaled, "Okay, that settles it. Monday, for family home evening, we'll help Eli move." She turned to her husband, "But, Ray, you have to help me. The thought of him moving in with another man makes me sick. I may step inside the house and break down crying. If they show me around the house, the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom . . ." She covered her face with her hands.

Ray waited for the tears to subside, then gently helped Roberta up and hugged her. "Happy anniversary," he whispered. "Last year we learned Eli was gay. Today, we learned he's moving in with his partner." Continuing to hold her, he reached for the light switch, "Don't worry, David will help us with answers. Be patient and everything will work out."

She pushed away, "I don't care about your stupid answers!" Between sobs she murmured, "Monday I move my son in with another man. Saturday I may see my parents for the last time. Don't you see? There aren't any answers . . . only pain!"

CHAPTER 9

At the front door Ray turned to Roberta, "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm sure. "

"Wish me luck."

She nodded as tears began to fill her eyes. He hugged and kissed her, "I love you."

Again she nodded, "Are you taking an umbrella? The forecast says rain."

"I'll be back before it starts." He hurried out the door.

"Get in the front seat," David hollered, "Nancy isn't going."

"Neither is Roberta. It's still hard for her to talk about the whole thing." Ray noticed that David had no such concerns. He talked excitedly about Dan's growth since coming out, describing with satisfaction the partners Dan had brought home on holidays and special occasions. Ray smiled. Still stiff and sore from helping Eli move in with his own partner, he understood his neighbor's satisfaction.

The closing strains of "Love at Home" floated past as they approached the local community center. They waited for the prayer to end, then quietly found seats on the back row. The person in charge addressed the twenty-five or so people in attendance, "We're here tonight because we love our gay and lesbian children. We love them enough to fight for them. While there's still a lot to do before our children have all their rights, some progress has been made. I've invited Brent, a law student at the university, to share some recent court rulings regarding equal

rights for our sons and daughters, including marriage. Brent is following these issues closely because of the impact they have in his own life. Let's give Brent a big hand."

After enthusiastic applause, Brent began speaking, "Thank you, I'm . . ."

Ray leaned over to David, "Who's the guy in charge? He looks familiar, but I can't place him."

"His name's Mitt. Maybe you've seen him at church," David whispered. "He serves on our stake high council."

"That's right; he spoke in our ward last year, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"About love?"

David nodded. Ray remembered being impressed as he listened to Mitt's sermon. He turned his attention back to Brent, ". . . during the past few years there's been much success within the court system regarding equal rights for sexual minorities. However, in comparison to the civil rights movement, we're still in the 1960s; our work's just beginning. There's still much to do before we reach our goal of equal rights for everyone—black and white, gay and straight."

After more enthusiastic applause, Brent reviewed several major court cases, explained the issues involved, and presented the final ruling in each case. As he described the positive impact of each ruling on the gay and lesbian population, the audience would erupt in cheers and applause. Brent's comments were an affirmation that their cause was just and would ultimately be successful. Ray felt himself caught up by the enthusiasm of the group.

During Brent's presentation, people commented that their children could never be successful or happy until each received all the rights that every other citizen of the country enjoyed. Brent agreed, pointing out that the concept of loving the sinner but hating the sin had been demolished by recent court opinions—a person and a person's conduct could not be separated. In closing, he encouraged everyone to be involved in the political process.

He suggested those in attendance write their congressional representatives and lobby for change at every opportunity. When he sat down, he received a standing ovation.

"Thank you, Brent," Mitt said as the noise died down. "Please continue to keep us informed of the progress you see." Turning to the audience he said, "We've got a lot of work to do. Laws must be changed and people must be educated. These have always been our primary goals." Mitt announced several upcoming activities and then closed the meeting.

After the prayer, David grabbed Ray's arm, "Come with me, I'll introduce you to Mitt."

They patiently waited until the crowd around Mitt thinned, then stepped forward, "Mitt, this is Ray Neels."

Mitt took Ray's hand in a firm grip, "Good to meet you, Ray. I'm glad you could attend tonight."

"Thank you."

"Do you have a gay son or daughter?"

"My son Eli."

"I imagine you love him very much."

Ray fought to hold back the tears, "I do. But I must admit my wife and I . . . feel it's our fault he's gay. We—"

Without a word, Mitt stepped forward and wrapped Ray in his powerful arms. Ray stiffened but quickly relaxed, surrounded by warmth and safety. Just as suddenly, Mitt released his protective embrace and in a loving voice commanded, "Don't blame yourself for anything. Your son is the way God created him. God loves your son. You need to love him the way God loves him."

Ray wiped his eyes, "I do love Eli, even though I struggle to show my love."

"Your being here says a lot about your love for Eli. Like you, my wife and I didn't know how to love our son after he came out. We wanted to do what Christ would do, but didn't know what that was. We read books and talked with others. We talked with our son and observed that he wasn't the awful person many in the Church said he was.

"Eventually we found this support organization. It was perfect for us. Through the group, we learned how to love our son and strengthen our family. That's one of the goals of the group. Another goal is to help every gay and lesbian member of the Church know he or she is a beloved child of God. We want parents to accept their homosexual children with love and understanding. We're against attitudes and policies that destroy family ties and loving relationships."

"That's good to hear," Ray smiled at Mitt. "I feel as if I've come home, that I've finally found a safe place to learn what I need to do."

Mitt returned his smile, "That's how my wife and I felt. We'd watched people in the Church turn against our son and realized that isn't what Christ would do."

"Mitt, what would Christ do?"

"Excellent question. To answer can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What is the great commandment?"

"To love God and to love our neighbors," Ray replied without hesitation.

"And who's your neighbor?"

"Everyone."

"Including our gay and lesbian children?"

"Yes!" Ray responded with emotion.

Mitt continued, "Jesus Christ loves each of us. My wife and I love each of our children, especially our son Tony. He's a sensitive, wonderful man. However, current Church policies don't accept him for who he is." His next question surprised Ray, "Do you love your wife?"

"Yes."

"Does she bring more joy into your life than anyone else?"

"Absolutely."

"Have you been faithful to your marriage vows?"

"You don't have to ask that question."

"I thought as much. That's all my son and his partner want—a committed, monogamous relationship. They want the same relationship that you and your wife enjoy. You do enjoy the marriage relationship with your wife?" Mitt asked with a smile.

All the things Ray had heard about Mitt were true. He was personable, articulate, and very good at helping Ray feel important. Ray smiled back at Mitt, "I enjoy my marriage relationship with my wife very much."

"Current Church policies promote your marriage relationship but demand that our sons remain celibate. Their only option is a life of celibacy and loneliness. Is that fair?"

"No. Not when you put it that way."

"Earlier this evening, Brent pointed out that barriers to our children are disappearing. Last year my wife and I attended a commitment ceremony for our son and his partner. I believe someday they'll be able to enjoy every blessing available to members of the Church, including marriage."

"So, is the Church wrong?"

"The Church is true, but ideas and attitudes that don't recognize and celebrate our gay children's unique nature are wrong. Within the Church, there's a lack of understanding regarding homosexuality. Church leaders preach the importance of families, but they break families apart by their unforgiving approach to homosexuality. They talk about rescuing the lost sheep, but they drive our sons and daughters into the wilderness. Some leaders still have a lot to learn."

"Yes, they do," Ray nodded knowingly. "Will the Church as a whole ever change?"

"Someday it will," Mitt replied emphatically. "The Church has changed in the past and it will change in the future. The Church was wrong to deny the black race the priesthood for so long, but protests and demonstrations in the 1970s forced change. The same thing happened with polygamy before the turn of the century. Outside pressure brought about change."

"So, are you pressuring the Church?"

"We are. We're also working to educate Church leaders and help members to love and accept their gay children."

"Mitt, both you and David have said our sons were born gay. Is that really true?"

"I'll again answer your question with another question. Did you choose to be heterosexual?"

Ray thought for a moment, "Not that I can remember."

"Our sons didn't choose to be homosexual any more than you or I chose to be heterosexual."

"Then, how does it happen?"

"Naturally. In fact, there's a lot of research that proves that homosexuality is genetic. Did you know that homosexuality has been documented in almost every species of mammals that has been studied extensively?"

"No."

"It's true. Homosexuality is so widespread among mammals that it's no surprise to find it in humans."

"That's awesome," Ray gushed enthusiastically, "I can't wait to tell Roberta about this. I haven't felt this good in a long time."

Mitt placed his hand on Ray's shoulder, "The most important thing you can do for your son is to love him. It's important that you support him, speak up for him, fight for his rights. You and your wife must become his biggest advocates."

"You can count on it," Ray promised.

* * *

"You should have taken an umbrella," Roberta chided Ray as he entered the house soaking wet. "I told you it was going to rain—you should have listened to me."

"You're right, as always," Ray agreed. "I need to listen to you. Whenever I don't pay attention to you . . . Roberta, have you been crying again?"

"Yes."

"Oh, honey, it doesn't have to be so painful. The people I met tonight were like a big, happy family. They welcomed me with

open arms, listened to my concerns, and answered my questions. They're moving forward and doing everything possible to love and support their children."

As Ray continued to share with Roberta all that he'd learned, it was obvious that she wouldn't become an advocate of Eli's gay lifestyle anytime soon. Irritated at her husband's enthusiasm, she broke in, "You still haven't explained what the Church teaches about homosexuality."

"Oh, the Church is true, but the policies regarding homosexuality are wrong," he answered patiently. "The leaders of the Church don't understand what the world already knows about this issue. They'll come around though, as we educate them."

Roberta shook her head in disbelief, "I can't imagine sitting down with the prophet to correct him. Ray, are *you* going to teach the prophet about homosexuality?"

"Not tonight," he laughed. "I need to learn more, but maybe someday. Mitt gave me lots of information, including letters from individuals just like us—parents who are successfully loving and supporting their children. Want to read them with me?"

"No, I'm going to bed, which is what you should do also."

Ray stopped organizing the papers in front of him and looked up, "You're right. I won't be too long."

"Good night then."

"Night, Honey. I love you."

Roberta was almost out of the room when she paused, "Ray?"

"Yes?"

"Earlier tonight you said you should listen to me more. Okay then, please listen to this: I have a bad feeling about what you heard tonight. You've shared with me ideas that sound like your mother's philosophy, sugar-coated with scriptures. Ideas specifically crafted to lead a member of the Church, like you or me, away from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Please be careful."

"I will be," he smiled, eagerly picking up the first page.

Late that night Ray finished reading, certain he'd finally found his answers.

CHAPTER 10

Roberta closed the curtains. "Ray!" she hollered. "Jesse just pulled into the driveway. You'd better get out there."

"I don't want to go," Ray whined as he entered the room.

"I know, but when he helped us move Eli, you told him you'd go. Anyway, I still don't agree with what you heard at your support group."

"It sounded right to me, and what Mitt said still makes a lot of sense. If homosexual behavior is found among numerous mammals, then why not man?"

"Because man is a literal son of God," Roberta retorted, "not one of His creations, like other mammals."

"Maybe, but I felt loved and accepted at the group. I think they have the answers we've been looking for."

"What you heard a month ago is one voice. It may be a true voice, although when I prayed about what you told me, my mind was confused. Ray, did you feel the Spirit at the support group?"

Her question surprised Ray. To humor her, he wrinkled his forehead as if in deep thought, but finally had to admit that he hadn't actually felt the Spirit.

"Please see what this new group has to offer as compared to the no-Spirit group," she begged. "And pray that God will help you know the truth. Now, get going!"

Ray hurried out through the front door, "Hi, Jesse. Nice sports car."

"Thanks. With only two seats, it's not much good for a family, but it's fun for a single guy."

"I'll bet it is. Say, does your back still hurt from moving Eli?"

"No, we moved him over a month ago. Does your back hurt?"

"Not now, but I was sore for most of the week. Glad you were there to help move the heavy stuff."

"Glad I could help," Jesse replied, keeping his eyes on the road.

"And thanks for picking me up tonight."

"You're welcome. Good to have someone to go with for a change."

"Tell me again how you're related to Jeff."

Jesse laughed, "I'm his favorite uncle."

"Got it," Ray smiled. "So how long has Jeff been involved in the gay lifestyle?"

"He came out about five years ago, when he was 18," Jesse began. "His parents and others, including me, were pushing him to prepare for a mission. But he didn't seem to have much interest in serving. After he told us about his sexual orientation, we began to understand why. Then he quit attending church. About a year ago he bought the house that he and Eli are now living in."

"I'm glad that Eli met Jeff. He seems like a good young man."

"He's a good nephew. The entire family loves him, but I admit that we don't understand his same-sex attractions."

"Understand his what?"

"Understand his same-sex attractions. That's the name they use at this group to describe Jeff's feelings."

"Oh, I've never heard of same-sex attraction," Ray responded thoughtfully. "Is that the same as being gay?"

"You need to understand that the world uses words such as *gay*, *lesbian*, and *homosexual* as nouns. That's wrong. Those words are adjectives, used to describe feelings or behavior."

"You're saying that Jeff isn't gay or homosexual, but that he's involved in homosexual behavior or is in the gay lifestyle."

"That's right. Of course, Jeff doesn't see it that way. He's accepted the homosexual identity or label that others have given him. He now defines who he is based on that label."

"Interesting," mused Ray. "That's what Eli did. Once he identified himself as gay, he started acting as he felt a gay man should act. What's a homosexual orientation?"

"It's a person's overall emotional and sexual arousal towards those of the same sex."

"That makes sense. Then are homosexual attractions the purely erotic and sexual attractions towards others of the same sex?"

"Yes," Jesse nodded in agreement. "Based on the world's definition of homosexual identity, a person's homosexual orientation and attractions are natural. Therefore, men can't control their behavior, and a just God won't hold them accountable for their actions. The Church teaches that while some men are born with inclinations or susceptibilities, every man has agency and can choose to control his behavior. By the way, was it a shock to learn your son experienced same-sex attractions?"

"Absolutely. We had no idea. I have a gay brother; I mean, I have a brother who feels same-sex attractions. I've known about my brother for 20 years or so, but I never imagined that Eli was the same way. He didn't get his attractions from my brother, did he?"

"No, same sex attraction is not a disease that's passed from one person to another."

"Last month I attended a support group for LDS parents of gay children. They feel that without question Eli and Jeff were born gay. What they said made a lot of sense to me, and they had scientific proof to support their point of view. After I got home that night, I told my wife I'd found my answers." Ray paused and looked out of the window, "But within a week I was as confused and unsettled as before."

Suddenly he turned and spoke a bit angrily,, "To be honest, I didn't want to come with you, but my wife made me. She kicked me out the door—told me to find the truth so I can move on."

Jesse chuckled, "Well, I don't know if you'll find the answers you're looking for tonight. We don't have much scientific proof at our meetings, but I do feel peace when I attend."

Ray sighed, "I'm okay with that. I thought finding answers would bring me peace, but that's not happened yet. Maybe I just haven't found the right answers."

"Maybe you're not asking the right questions?"

"That may be true," he replied thoughtfully, then added, "Anyway, I have more questions than answers."

"Such as?"

"Like, why does Eli feel same-sex attractions?"

Jesse let out a long whistle, "Good question. I don't know why Eli or Jeff or any other man experiences same-sex attraction. To be honest, I haven't worried too much about it."

"I've got to hand it to you," Ray replied. "You seem to be dealing with things well; maybe it's because you're an uncle and not a father. I can't get Eli's situation out of my mind. Maybe, as my children say, I need to chill out."

"Chill out?" Jesse chuckled. "Most people find it hard to chill out about this issue. At group, as we call it, everyone deals with their loved one's struggles differently. After attending for several months, I realized there's no one correct way to respond. Every family's situation is different, so every family needs to respond as the Spirit directs. We're here," Jesse announced.

The support group met in the cafeteria of a social work building. The group was smaller than the one he'd attended the previous week, and Ray felt uncomfortable sitting in a circle facing a dozen other people. *What am I doing here?* he wondered, sure each person was looking directly at him. After an opening prayer, John, the facilitator, asked everyone to introduce themselves and say something about their situation.

"I'm Pam," the woman sitting next to John began. "My son came out four years ago, just after returning from his mission."

I can relate to that, Ray thought, relieved to meet someone with a similar experience. Ray was impressed by her courage and humbled by her faith in Jesus Christ. As he listened, he felt the Spirit begin to warm his breast. It was a peaceful feeling, different from what he'd felt at the pep rally-like meeting the month before.

The next person in the circle introduced herself, "I'm Kathy. My son Wayne is still in high school. I love him and worry about him every day."

"I'm Jesse and I've been attending this group for almost a year. My nephew Jeff is fixing up a house he bought a year ago. Last month I helped his partner move in with him."

"Hi, I'm Ray. I'm here because my wife made me come," Ray announced truthfully, as he looked at the next person in the circle.

"I'm Dan . . . "

As Ray half listened to the experiences of others, he continued to review in his mind what he'd felt the week before.

"I'm Ethan. Years ago I was in the gay lifestyle . . ."

What? Ray stared at the older man sitting across from him. *Did I hear him right?*

". . . And this is my wonderful wife, Beth."

Ray couldn't take his eyes off the man. *Does this mean that change is possible?*

Ray was involved now. He listened intently as people shared ways to help a son or daughter who experienced same-sex attraction. Writing as fast as possible, Ray made special note of Church magazine articles and conference talks that addressed the issue. Apparently the Church had said more about same-sex attraction than Ray had been able to find on his own. He tried to record everything people said, their successes as well as their failures. Several people, with tears in their eyes, bore testimony that God wouldn't forsake faithful parents.

Although Ray attempted to stay detached, the Spirit continued to warm his soul. He soon confessed to the group, "I didn't tell the whole truth earlier this evening. I am here because my wife made me come. But I'm also here because I have a gay son. Since he came out over a year ago, I've struggled to understand all the issues. May I ask a question?"

Every face nodded for him to continue.

"As I've talked with other parents about this issue, they insist that our children were born gay and can't change. They feel the Church doesn't understand our sons and daughters. They point out that when the prophet was asked in a nationally televised interview what caused homosexuality, he said that he didn't know. These parents seem to have scientific proof and answers that the Church doesn't have."

The facilitator, who up to that point had been quiet, spoke, "When my son came out, I didn't know who to follow. For months I prayed for direction. One night the word *tobacco* kept coming to my mind. Puzzled, I began to study section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants."

As he talked, he opened his scriptures, "Then I understood. When the Lord, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, gave instructions regarding tobacco, He simply said, and I quote, 'tobacco is not for the body, neither for the belly, and is not good for man.' As I reflected on that statement, I realized that for many years there was no explanation as to why we weren't to use tobacco. All we had was the Lord's word through His prophets. People chose to follow His word based on faith, with or without an explanation.

"I remember as a teenager listening to the surgeon general of the United States talk about new scientific proof that tobacco was harmful to the human body. But for many years after that initial announcement, other scientific research showed tobacco to be harmless. I didn't know what to believe. In time I learned that the tobacco industry had sponsored much of the research that showed smoking was harmless. That industry, of course, had

much to lose. Anyway, science was not an answer to the debate at that time. Since then science has established beyond question that the use of tobacco is harmful. But because there's a prophet on the earth, we as a church didn't have to wait until science finally got it right. Since 1833, the teachings of the prophets and of the Church have remained consistent.

"In reality the prophet was being more honest than others when he said he didn't know what caused homosexuality. Right now, no one knows the cause of the same-sex attractions that our loved ones feel. Science is not the answer. Scientific research, and I use that term loosely, is used by both sides in the debate to prove their point and to disprove the other side's point."

"That's why there's a prophet on the earth today—to help us know the truth," interjected Dan. "The scriptures define truth as 'knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.' Only a prophet can teach that kind of truth."

"Amen to that," Pam said. "Let me give you an example. During the 70s, my best friend read a book that promoted sexual freedom with no responsibilities. The book was a huge success, selling millions of copies. It influenced many people, including my friend. Recently, I saw a newspaper article about the book's author. According to the article, she practiced the sexual freedom she preached and her life was a mess. She went through multiple divorces, lost her friends, and battled alcoholism. Several years ago, she wrote a new book in which she promoted monogamy. She now insists there's contentment in monogamy that can't be found in the sexual freedom she promoted 40 years ago. She's been married to her fourth husband for over 18 years and loves it."

"But my poor friend followed that author's advice and has experienced only sadness and pain. She's unable to develop lasting relationships." Pam looked at Ray, "What if you'd followed that author as you were growing up in the 70s? Where would you be today?"

Ray shrugged, embarrassed.

John quickly came to Ray's rescue, "None of us know where we'd be today if we'd made different choices. But I'm certain that if I'd followed her, I'd have felt the same heartache and pain. That author obviously didn't understand the consequences of the lifestyle she was promoting. Only God can see the end from the beginning. That's why throughout the ages, He's directed the prophets to teach the importance of chastity, morality, and the sanctity of marriage. Today, the prophet teaches the same message in relation to same-sex attraction."

Ray summarized what he'd heard, "You're saying the prophet sees same-sex attraction from an eternal perspective and he understands the issues better than people think."

"That's right," added Pam. "For our part, we can choose to follow the prophet or the world."

"As we choose whom to follow it's helpful to remember a warning that's contained in the Word of Wisdom." John again read from his scriptures, "'In consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days, I have warned you, and forewarn you.' Conspiring men in these last days preach that homosexuality is innate and immutable. They advocate such things as same-sex marriage and adoption of children by same-sex couples, with absolutely no idea of the consequences. As I said before, only God can see the end from the beginning. For that reason, brothers and sisters, I'll follow the prophet."

The Spirit warmed Ray's bosom as he wrote in large letters: I WILL FOLLOW THE PROPHET!

Following the closing prayer, Ray cornered Ethan. After appropriate small talk, Ray got to the point, "I have a lot of questions I'd like to ask you, do you mind?"

"Ask away," Ethan encouraged, "although I'm not sure I'll be much help."

"I think you can help because you've had experiences I haven't had." Ray paused, "I don't know where to begin."

"Am I gay? Is that a good place to begin?"

"It certainly is."

"I was in the gay lifestyle for years," Ethan smiled, then shook his head. "But, I'm not in it now."

"Does that mean you've changed?"

"If you mean change, as in being attracted to women and not being attracted whatsoever to men, no. My attractions to men have diminished, but I still have them."

"So you haven't changed?" Ray replied perplexed.

"I'll try to explain; you're married, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"And you love your wife and you're attracted to her?"

"Yes."

"So you don't notice beautiful and attractive women you pass on the street?"

"I do," Ray admitted hesitantly. "But I try to only look once and then move on. I don't dwell on what I see."

"That's my situation with the men I see," explained Ethan. "I notice men, but I don't have an overwhelming attraction to them. And I control my thoughts to keep it that way."

"Was my son born with the attractions he feels towards other men?" Ray inquired.

"There may be a genetic component to the attractions, but there are also psychological and social influences," Ethan answered. "Everyone's story seems to be different. I'll tell you one possible explanation, but remember that there's no conclusive evidence for one explanation over another. As a boy grows, he goes through several stages. First, as a baby and a young child, he clings to his mother. Then he rejects her and tries to become his own man; I should say, tries to become his own boy.

"The next phase is a desire to be with other boys, to be part of a team or a group. You see this in Cub Scouts and Little League teams. They wear the same uniform, play the same games, and hike through the same mud. They have little interest in girls, other than to tease them."

"That sure sounds like my sons when they were younger," Ray laughed.

Ethan continued, "Boys seek acceptance or validation from the other boys or from a significant adult, such as a father, coach, or youth leader. In their early teens, they start to notice girls in new ways. The girls they once teased are now different: they're mysterious and nice to look at. At about this same time, most young men start going through puberty. Puberty is new and mysterious also, hard to make sense of at times. During puberty, a young man is easily aroused: pants too tight, he's aroused; pants too loose, he's aroused; too hot, aroused; too cold, aroused. And because of his interest in girls, every time he's aroused, he's either thinking about or looking at a girl. He soon equates arousal with girls.

"But some boys take a different route. They may have different interests than sports or digging in the dirt. They may enjoy the beauty of the outdoors but hate to hunt or fish because that kills part of the beauty. Their interests may include art, music, drama, sewing, cooking, interior design, activities many boys shun."

"Interesting," Ray mused. "Eli, my gay son . . . I mean, Eli, my son who experiences same-sex attraction, is an excellent musician. Growing up, he practiced musical instruments much more than he practiced basketball."

"Remember," Ethan cautioned, "an interest in music or art isn't bad or wrong. Our society has done men a huge disservice by earmarking certain activities for women and other activities for men. Although these boys have varied interests and skills, they still want to be part of the gang. They want to be socially accepted and recognized by other boys their age. They're still looking for what the British would call a 'chum,' a buddy who understands them and wants to be with them. Many of these boys participate in sports. Some are very athletic. Others, without anyone to teach them how to play the games, don't develop good skills. They're the last boy chosen to be on a team or they're ridiculed when they make a mistake. They draw more and more into their own world, and further away from the group of boys they envy.

"When these young men reach puberty they're still trying to understand boys. They're still trying to be accepted by them. When they begin to experience arousals, for whatever reason, they're still thinking about boys. They begin to equate arousal with boys."

"Is that what happened to you?"

"No, I was sexually abused by a coach and physically abused by my father. It was impossible, as a young child, to make sense of what was happening to me, especially the bad things. For years, I blamed my mother and brothers for not protecting me. Now I realize they were going through the same hell. Everyone responded differently to what happened, almost as if each was born with certain tendencies. One of my brothers became hard and fought back. He has since abused his own wife and children. Another brother somehow broke the cycle and has healthy relationships with his wife and children. I turned to other men for comfort."

"I'm so sorry," said Ray.

Ethan continued, "Some of these boys, the ones who never find a 'chum' or never become part of a group, eventually discover sex as a way to connect with other men. The connections they form are short-lived, but do meet immediate needs. They become involved in the gay lifestyle, a lifestyle that becomes a powerful force in their lives.

"Many in the lifestyle become offended when the prophet or apostles teach that their behavior is learned or is the result of experiences they've had. Yet no one would say that my brother was born an abusive husband or father. I've never understood how people can insist my brother learned his abusive behavior and can change, and in the same breath insist my sexual behavior is unlearned and I can't change. Why can he control his actions and I can't control mine? It's possible we were each born with certain tendencies, but those tendencies don't determine what we will become. Although I didn't realize it years ago, I always had my agency and could choose how I behaved. The idea that I

was born gay and must act a certain way is contrary to the gospel plan and to common sense."

Ray shook his head, "So, my son has the ability to control his behavior?"

"Yes. According to the gospel, every man can choose how he'll act, and every man is accountable for his choices."

Rubbing his forehead and staring into space, Ray felt overwhelmed by the things he'd heard. The Spirit burning in his heart was an easily recognizable difference to the noisy enthusiasm and camaraderie of the other support group. He turned to Ethan, "So how'd you get out of the lifestyle? Was it hard?"

"I didn't want to be in the lifestyle and tried for years to leave it," he admitted. "I was unsuccessful, until I found a group that approached same-sex attraction based on gospel principles. They helped me to approach my challenges from a spiritual perspective. For a number of years, I attended a men's support group that they offered. During the same time, a therapist helped me understand that my attractions were neither innate nor immutable. My priesthood leaders were helpful, but the real key to moving out of the lifestyle was my faith in Jesus Christ and the Atonement. Without my Savior and His grace, I would still be where I was 10 years ago.

"Let me read what the Bible says." Ethan quickly opened his scriptures to a well-worn page. "This is the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians, 'Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God.'

"Now listen to this, 'And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified . . .' and I always add, but ye are changed '. . . in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.'"

"I like that. So how can I get my son to change—the way you have changed?"

Ethan smiled, "You can start by loving him, by being there for him, and by not rejecting him. Don't judge him and don't require him to change. Always see him as a whole person, as a son of God, not just a gay man. Talk to him, spend time with him, and try to understand him. Some day, if he desires to confront his attractions, be there for him."

"Ethan, it'll take me a while to digest all that I've heard tonight. How can I ever thank you?"

"Thank me by loving your son. Don't make him go through what I did. And remember, the closer you are to the Spirit, the more effective and Christlike will be your love."

"But there's nothing I can do right now to help my son change? I don't want to wait too long," Ray complained.

Ethan frowned at Ray, "Look at me and listen carefully. Your son has his agency—only he can decide what he'll do with his life."

"Sorry," Ray apologized. "Obviously I don't understand agency."

"There are many things you don't understand. If you're interested, there's a conference coming up on same-sex attraction that may be helpful."

"Thanks."

* * *

That night as Ray entered the kitchen, Roberta was engrossed in her most recent sewing magazine. "Did you get some new answers?" she asked without looking up.

"I did," Ray replied excitedly. "You won't believe what I saw and heard this evening."

Roberta looked up, a quizzical expression on her face, "Okay, tell me what you saw and heard, and I'll tell you whether or not I believe you."

"I met a man who was in the gay lifestyle for years but is now married. His wife was even at the meeting with him."

"I don't believe you," Roberta responded in disbelief.

"I swear it's true. I met parents who're trying to stay faithful to gospel teachings and love their child. And, unlike the group I attended last week, I felt the Spirit tonight."

Ray had Roberta's full attention now, "A spiritual support group. Wonderful! Tell me what else you learned."

"First thing, Eli's not gay. What Eli experiences is better described as same-sex attraction."

"What does that mean?"

For the next hour, Ray and Roberta had their most positive conversation in over a year. Later as they knelt together in prayer, they expressed humble thanks for each other and for the hope they felt through Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 11

"Hi, Ray," Ethan smiled. "How are you?"

"I'm well," he replied softly, "although I have several concerns."

"Do you want to tell me about them?"

"Sure, why not," Ray spoke hesitantly. "I left the meeting last month convinced that you'd told me the truth."

"Thank you. I swear I didn't lie to you."

"But you didn't have research or proof to back up what you said. Believing you requires a lot of faith, maybe more than I have."

Ethan nodded knowingly.

"Then last week I attended the nonspiritual support group, as my wife puts it. They're absolutely sure that change is not possible and that love and acceptance is the only answer. Last Sunday I attended a fireside they sponsored on the genetic causes of homosexuality. Based on what I heard at the fireside, I'm almost certain my son was born gay."

Ethan looked deep into Ray's eyes before answering. "There are many voices in the world in regards to same-sex attraction. Only you can choose which voice you'll follow, but choose carefully because the voice you choose may determine your eternal destiny. Would you like to talk about what you heard at the fireside?"

"Yes. Can we visit after this meeting? I brought my notes and—"

"Okay, everybody," the facilitator interrupted the conversation, "time to begin."

"I've got to leave early tonight," Ethan whispered. "Come with me."

After making themselves comfortable in an adjacent room, Ray began reading from his notes, "The main speaker at the fireside was a professor from the university named Peter. A life long member of the Church he seemed knowledgeable about the topic.

"He began the fireside by presenting research showing that homosexuals have a greater chance of being left-handed than heterosexuals. He suggested this was most likely caused by in utero exposure to hormones. He shared a graph that showed finger length is different based on sexual orientation. A second graph showed that a higher number of older brothers in a family would increase the possibility that a new baby boy will be homosexual. Peter claimed this was caused by changes to the mother's antibodies triggered by an earlier male fetus.

"Another study showed that homosexuality runs in families, although Peter said that this didn't prove that homosexuality was genetic. He shared twin studies that proved homosexuality has a strong genetic link." Ray paused to see if he had missed anything, then continued, "Peter felt that approximately 60% of homosexuality can be explained by genetic factors. The remaining 40% are environmental factors that take place before birth as chemicals and molecules in the uterus interacted with the fetus. The bottom line is that homosexuality is determined before birth, either genetically or within the uterus."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Confused and frustrated. What I heard on Sunday was different from what you told me last month. Peter's presentation was logical, but my wife said that what you've told me feels better spiritually. I don't know what to believe. Even with all his facts and figures, Peter conceded that there are numerous unanswered questions. He repeatedly said that no one knows how things work on the molecular level, but felt that someday scientists would understand. His conclusion, which I agree

with, was that even though there's no single 'gay gene,' all the evidence proves that a person's sexual orientation is innate and immutable."

"Which means?"

"It means that a person's sexual orientation is determined at birth and can't be changed."

Ethan slowly shook his head, "I think I can answer some of your questions. Tell me about the twin study."

Ray thumbed through his notes again, "Okay, that study showed that among identical twins where one twin was gay, over half the time the other twin was also gay. It was a much higher percentage than among fraternal twins with one gay twin or among brothers where one brother was gay. Peter claimed it proved a genetic correlation that was too high to ignore; the same set of genes, the same sexual orientation."

"In the scientific arena," Ethan responded, "the twin studies are used to both prove and disprove the notion there's a gay gene. Among the identical twins you mentioned, if one has blue eyes the other will have blue eyes 100% of the time. That's a proven genetic relationship. If homosexuality were purely genetic, like eye color, when one twin was homosexual the other twin would be homosexual 100% of the time. Logically, isn't that what you would expect—identical twins, identical genes, identical sexual orientation?"

"I guess that's true."

"Peter was selective in the information he chose to present at the fireside. Most of the information I've found suggests that multiple factors influence a person's sexual orientation. Even researchers who are pro-gay in their beliefs feel this way. You realize that outside of one's sexual orientation, there are other examples of multiple factors influencing a person's health or behavior."

"Such as what?" Ray challenged.

"One example is multiple sclerosis; you know, MS. Years ago MS was considered to be a genetic disorder. I recently read that now most scientists feel the cause of MS is 'multi-factorial.' In

other words, a person's genetic heritage, gender, birthplace, age, and environment contribute to susceptibility and resistance to MS. The entry said that while MS is not an inherited disease, in a strict sense, certain susceptibilities may run in families."

"That's interesting."

"I'll give you another example. You play basketball, don't you?"

"I do, mostly with my children."

"Good, you'll relate to this example. Imagine a man and a woman who're both tall, athletic, collegiate basketball players. They meet, marry, and have a son whom they name George. They give George a small basketball on his first birthday. He grows up with a basketball in his hands—always dribbling, passing, shooting.

"Imagine that George and his parents spend hundreds of hours playing basketball as a family on their backyard court. They attend collegiate and professional games together. George begins playing basketball on a city rec team before he learns how to ride a bike. By the time he enters junior high school, he's the best basketball player in the school. He's skilled, coordinated, athletic, and competitive. And, he's two feet taller than any other student is. George has an outstanding collegiate career and goes on to play professional basketball. Now, my question to you: was George born a basketball player?"

"No."

"Was he predestined to become a basketball player or did he have a choice?"

"Obviously he had choices."

"Okay then, what factors influenced him?"

Ray thought for a moment before replying, "Well, his height was genetic. His athleticism and coordination may have also been genetic. Who knows? He may have acquired his competitive nature and love of the game from his family. His skills were probably the result of hundreds, no thousands of hours of practice. I imagine his coaches and peers also had an influence on him."

"I agree," Ethan replied. "Multiple factors influenced him. As I indicated before, most researchers feel that homosexuality is the result of many of the same general influences that made George an exceptional basketball player. A man may be born with certain susceptibilities or tendencies, but his homosexual feelings and behavior are the result of the complex interaction of genes, which we've discussed, plus psychological and social factors. The factors may include early experiences with family and peers; temperament; abuse, especially sexual abuse; self-perception; things like that. Of course, every man also has agency and can choose how he'll respond to life's experiences. This is in keeping with teachings of the Church that no one is born with a drive or behavior that can't be controlled. Many people, including you and me, have feelings or susceptibilities that we never asked for and would get rid of if we could. We see this in people all the time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Ethan continued, "Some can drink alcohol their entire life without a problem. Other people have one beer and struggle with alcoholism until they die."

"I've heard that alcoholism is genetic."

"There may be a genetic component to alcoholism. There's also evidence to suggest that growing up in an environment of alcoholism can influence a person's behavior."

Ray shook his head, "I see your point—both genetic and environmental factors probably do have an impact."

"That's right," Ethan agreed. "But while multiple factors influence a person's behavior, proving what is cause and what is effect is hard. The complexity of human behavior makes it nearly impossible for a researcher to control all the variables that can affect the outcome of his work."

"Last week, John, a fellow I work with, was fired because of his addiction to internet pornography," Ray interjected. "He claimed porn was never a problem in his life, until he stumbled onto an internet site six months ago. One exposure and he was

hooked. However, I know another man who has viewed pornography for years without being affected like John. We both know that there are always consequences to viewing pornography, but one man was affected much differently than the other."

Ethan nodded, "That's why you never take that first look at porn. Remember that the gospel teaches that we have agency, or the power to choose to resist our feelings and inclinations. Alma taught his son to bridle all his passions. I learned in Primary that 'Feelings lead to thoughts, / Thoughts lead to behavior, / Behavior leads to character,' and so forth. The whole message of the gospel is that we can determine behavior, and we're accountable for our actions. At the fireside, did Peter have anything to say about Simon LeVay?"

"Well," Ray began as he checked his notes, "he said the press reported that Dr. LeVay had proven that homosexuality was biologically based. LeVay had looked at the size of neurons in the INAH3 region of the brain and found larger neurons in some of the heterosexual men than he found in some of the homosexual men. He theorized that the differences in size may determine a person's sexual orientation."

"I've heard of LeVay's study. Some scientists feel his research has problems."

"Oh, what kind of problems?"

"The chart that accompanied his findings showed some homosexual men with larger neurons than the heterosexual men. And, conversely, several heterosexual men had smaller neurons than the homosexual men did. In other words, his findings were not as clear cut and logical as was claimed in the initial press releases. He later pointed out that there were limitations in his study and readily admitted that he hadn't found a gay center in the brain nor had he proven that homosexuality was genetic. Unfortunately, these later statements received little or no press coverage.

"Other researchers have shown that behavior can cause physical changes in the brain. At this point, there's no way to tell if the size of the neurons that LeVay studied were the result of

specific behavior or the cause of the behavior. Also, there's no scientific evidence to show that the INAH3 region of the brain even determines sexual orientation. And, there may be research bias in his study."

"Why would there be research bias?" Ray challenged. "As a scientist, wouldn't he have used correct research methodology?"

"You'd hope that he used correct procedures," replied Ethan. "But, he's openly gay. At one time, he publicly stated he was looking for a biological cause for homosexuality."

"I didn't know that. Be that as it may, that doesn't prove bias."

"No, it doesn't, but the possibility does exist. Beyond that, no scientist has been able to replicate LeVay's results, which some people feel makes his study meaningless—or at least suspect. One researcher even produced results that contradicted LeVay's findings. Did Peter mention Dr. Dean Hamer?"

The question surprised Ray, "Why yes, he said the press reported that Dr. Hamer had found the gay gene."

Ethan chuckled, "That's what the press reported all right. Dr. Hamer, who is also a self-identified gay, did find genes on chromosomal region Xq28 that he felt contributed to homosexuality in males. In a book he wrote after the discovery, he estimated that the genes on Xq28 played some role in 5 to 30 percent of gay men. That clearly falls far short of a universal gay gene."

"But it could still affect men."

"It may, but to date neither Dr. Hamer nor any other researcher has been able to demonstrate what is inherited or how specific genes influence sexual orientation. Other scientists, such as William Byne, Bruce Parsons, Richard Friedman, and Jennifer Downey, have reviewed the biological studies and concluded that current research doesn't support a purely genetic explanation for homosexuality. Dr. Janet Cummings and Dr. Francis Collins both assert that multiple factors—such as environment, experiences, and choice—affect a person's sexual orientation.

"Oh," Ray replied, a bit deflated, "I can understand that what you're saying might be true. In his presentation, Peter conceded several times that there's no indisputable proof of the existence of a gay gene. He also admitted there continues to be unanswered questions as to how things work. I noticed that during his presentation he repeatedly said, 'We think this is caused by . . .' or 'The most likely explanation is . . . .'"

"Did Peter also discuss the studies done by Spitzer, Karten, Yarhouse, or Jones?"

"No, those names don't sound familiar. Did they find the same things as LeVay and Hamer?"

"No, something quite different," Ethan replied with a smile. "They found that individuals can overcome their homosexual attractions. Dr. Robert Spitzer's research is probably the most interesting."

"Why's that?"

"Back in 1973, Spitzer led the effort to remove homosexuality as a mental illness from the American Psychological Association's diagnostic manual. In the years that followed, all negative references to homosexuality were also removed from the manual. The APA joined with gay activists in promoting the idea that if an individual felt uncomfortable with his gay identity, it was because of society's homophobic attitudes. However, after meeting with a number of ex-gays in 2000, Spitzer began to question some of his long-held beliefs. He met with hundreds of individuals who had changed from a homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation and concluded that change was possible. After vigorous peer review, the study was published in a prestigious scientific journal. He was attacked personally for even suggesting the idea of change, but few attempted to refute his research.

"Spitzer encouraged other scientists to review his study and made his data available to them. Dr. Scott Hershberger, a strong supporter of gay causes, did a vigorous review of the study and came to the same conclusion as Dr. Spitzer—that an individual can change from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation.

"Elan Karten, Dr. Stanton Jones, and Dr. Mark Yarhouse have also conducted research that shows change is possible. Interestingly, several of them have found that spirituality and faith in God can be important elements in the change process."

Ray nodded. "If I remember correctly, you weren't able to change until you turned to Jesus Christ."

"That's right. When I began to trust in Christ and realized I could choose my behavior, I began to make progress. Did Peter say anything about responsibility or accountability?"

Ray gave Ethan another surprised look. "Well, during the question and answer session, one mother blamed herself for her son's homosexuality. She felt that either her genes or her uterus caused her son to be gay. Peter responded that because she had no choice in what happened, she wasn't responsible for her son's sexual orientation. He also insisted that fathers aren't responsible for a child's homosexual behavior. Throughout his presentation, he emphasized that our sons and daughters aren't responsible. He said it so often, I wrote in my notes that no one's responsible."

"So, Peter suggested that we're like every other mammal, only doing what comes naturally when we engage in homosexual behavior?"

Ray shook his head, "He didn't say it in those exact words, but that was his message. Are you sure you didn't attend the same fireside?"

"No, but I've heard it before. It's pretty standard stuff for those who don't want to be held accountable. Remember though, the belief that we're not accountable for our actions is foreign to the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

"Some individuals can't control how they act," Ray insisted.

"I disagree," Ethan opened his Book of Mormon. "The scriptures are perfectly clear that all men have agency and can choose how they act. Lehi taught, 'Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.' Then he adds, 'Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of

all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil.' Later, Jacob told his people to 'cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.'

"The scriptures state that just as all men can choose their actions, so all men will be held accountable for their choices. After reminding his people that they are free to choose, King Benjamin continued, 'But this much I can tell you, that if ye do not watch your selves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith . . . even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish.'

Ethan continued, "Alma taught, 'For our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God.' But even though we don't dare look up to our God, 'we must come forth and stand before him in his glory, and in his power, and in his might, majesty, and dominion, and acknowledge to our everlasting shame that all his judgments are just.'"

Ray let out a long sigh, "That's pretty harsh. Do you suggest that I pound Eli with the doctrines of agency and accountability?"

"Absolutely not," Ethan replied. "I only shared those scriptures with you to show that Peter wasn't teaching correct doctrine. Eli probably already knows the doctrine because he learned it from you when he was young. I imagine the teachings were very painful to him at times."

"We tried to teach him those things. I'm afraid we failed."

"Not at all. I think he knows the doctrine, but he may have forgotten that God loves him and you love him. You need to tell him every day that you love him."

"I do love him, but I haven't always shown my love in a manner that he could understand. Even now, it's hard to show my love."

"We can all do a better job of loving others. However, if you show your love for Eli by becoming an advocate for the

gay lifestyle and by telling him that he's not responsible for his actions, you're damning both him and yourself."

"But, it's not fair," Ray muttered.

"What's not fair?"

"Peter said that even if our children weren't born gay, it's not fair that they can't marry and have a long-term monogamous relationship that is recognized by the Church and state. Don't they have a right to be happy like everyone else?"

"I've been hearing that argument more and more," replied Ethan." The pro-gay movement believes that some day science will prove them right. But, they're tired of waiting; they want all their rights, right now. Those who are members of the Church have persuasive arguments that emphasize unconditional love and quote scriptures to prove the Savior would have supported same-sex marriage. They only ask that we be loving, compassionate, and fair."

"Those were Mitt's exact words at the support group last week, and I think his point's well taken. It isn't fair that our sons are denied their rights. They can't even meet a basic need because of the teachings of the Church."

"Sex is a basic need?"

"Mitt claimed it is," Ray defiantly replied.

"Water, food, and oxygen are basic needs; we'll die without them. When was the last time you heard of someone dying because he didn't have sex?" Ethan laughed, then added seriously, "Ray, we can argue about this all night, and you can spend the rest of your life listening to all the voices in the world about homosexuality. You need to stop listening and simply choose which voice you'll follow."

Ray nodded in agreement.

"Be aware that if you listen to Peter and others like him, his voice, his alleged scientific proof, his goals, and his arguments will change over the years. The voice or doctrine of the Church, on the other hand, will stay the same. The prophet's teachings on the plan of happiness, standards of morality, the sanctity of

marriage, and the importance of family are the same today as when the Church was restored."

"Obviously you don't agree with Peter's conclusions."

"I agree with part of what he said. All of us need to do a better job of showing our love to those who experience same-sex attraction. But you don't help Eli or anyone else by enabling or promoting immoral behavior."

"You're saying that the causes of Eli's attractions aren't nearly as important as how we respond to them."

"That's right. Your earlier question about who is telling the truth is easy to answer. But the answer isn't based on scientific evidence, it's based on faith. Ray, if you believe the prophet is called of God and that he teaches God's word, then you know where to find the truth regarding same-sex attraction."

"And if I don't believe the prophet is called of God, then the truth is somewhere else," Ray interjected.

"That's right. Earlier you correctly observed that I don't have proof to support my position. But I do have the witness of the Spirit, which is more powerful than any tangible proof." Ethan looked at his watch. "I need to leave for my other appointment. I'm sorry."

"Thanks for visiting with me. By the way, I have felt the Spirit tonight. I didn't feel the same Spirit at Peter's presentation." Ray smiled, "I think I know where the truth is."

"I've felt the Spirit tonight also. Remember, the Spirit can teach you all things, including things that you do not hear in any meeting. He can and will answer your individual questions."

Ray stood and shook Ethan's hand, "Have you ever considered being a spokesman for the Church? Someone with your experience needs to counter all those who say the Church is wrong."

"Not me," objected Ethan with a chuckle, "The Lord's called the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve to speak for His Church. They teach the doctrine and they warn the people. It's up to us to follow them."

"True, but thanks again for *your* help." Ray didn't join the larger group, but sat alone pondering. Before talking with Ethan, he'd felt comfortable with his conclusions. As he reflected on the scientific proof, the equality of men, and his feelings toward Eli, Ray still felt his conclusions contained some validity. He knew that many others felt the same as he did. But he couldn't deny the warm witness of the Spirit that Ethan had taught the truth.

CHAPTER 12

Ray's oldest son glared at him from across the desk, "Dad, I don't care what you think; Sharon and I aren't starting a family until after I graduate."

"You're wrong, John—that may take you ten years," Ray argued.

"There's nothing wrong with preparing for the future. After I have a degree, our children will have more opportunities than other children will. Look at Mary and Mike. They're living hand to mouth; they can't give their children anything."

"They can give them love. Anyway, you and Sharon have a Cruise planned for next summer, and you're buying a lot of fancy things for your apartment. Son, your priorities are messed up."

"Dad, look at these facts," John said as he handed over what looked to be a research paper. "It's obviously better to finish college before starting a family."

Ray grabbed the paper and quickly scanned the figures, "Who prepared this junk?"

"Paul Douglas, he's a professor at the university. And it's not junk."

"Why follow Professor Douglas?" Ray demanded, waving the paper in front of John's face. "Based on these numbers he doesn't know what he's talking about."

"He's an expert, dad, and he's not alone. I've seen other studies that show the same results."

"But why follow him when you can follow a prophet of God?" Ray replied in a steady voice. "You know what the prophet has said about—"

"Don't talk to me about following the prophet," John interrupted, his voice rising. "For the last six months, I've heard you say repeatedly that the prophet doesn't understand homosexuality. I've heard you say the Church's stand on same-sex marriage may be wrong. Dad, if the prophet's wrong about homosexuality, he can be wrong about when to start a family."

"That's an entirely different issue," Ray fought to control his anger.

"Not in my mind. You're such a hypocrite, Dad. It's okay for you to pick and choose which teachings you'll follow, but it's not okay for me? Isn't there something about God not allowing the prophet to lead the Church astray? If he's wrong about homosexuality, he's no longer a prophet."

"That's enough, son!" Ray responded sharply.

"No, it's not!" John angrily retorted. He stood, moved to the door, and in a frosty tone concluded, "You've said there are many voices a person can follow. Dad, if I've chosen the world's voice, I'm only following your example."

Ray pleaded with the disappearing figure, "Don't go, son, please don't go . . . please, don't leave me alone . . . please . . . ." He closed his eyes and wept. He was alone, his well-ordered world beginning to spin out of control.

"Family scripture time," he heard Roberta announce from the family room. Although Ray didn't want to be with anyone, he knew what was expected. Stepping into the bathroom, he quickly washed away his tears with cold water. Unfortunately, the water did nothing for his bloodshot eyes. As he joined the family, Bob was already reading, "'. . . and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree.'"

I've always clung to the rod, I've tasted the gospel fruit, Ray reminded himself.

"'. . . they did cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed . . . .'"

I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

"'. . . they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them . . . .'"

But, am I ashamed of the prophet's simple, straight forward statements on homosexuality? Am I ashamed when Mitt and others question my love for Eli?

"'. . . they did point the finger of scorn at me . . . For as many as heeded them, had fallen away . . . .'"

* * *

After Roberta and the children went to bed, Ray returned to his study. Desperate for support, he reread several items he'd received from Mitt. Surprisingly, the words and ideas that had seemed so enriching and comforting only weeks before were now empty and lifeless. Especially troubling were the letters written by individuals with a homosexual son or daughter. As he reread each letter, he noticed several things he'd missed before. First, although the writers were no longer active members of the Church, each had included an account of his or her service in auxiliaries, bishoprics, or stake presidencies. Ray absentmindedly referred to this as a "Calling and Worthiness Resume" and wondered why the writers felt a need to document previous faithful activity.

The second thing he noticed was that the once faithful members were now blaming the Church or Church leaders for their pain and anguish. Each person wrote that the Church was wrong, the prophet didn't understand, the priesthood didn't heal a child, the stake president couldn't answer a questions, the bishop hadn't shown sufficient compassion or the members had been cruel and unkind. The letters contained the same feelings of pain, confusion, and helplessness that he felt, not the hope and comfort he needed. Ray felt no peace as he read expressions of unbelief and rejection of the Church, the prophet, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Especially troubling was the testimony of a man who had served as a bishop for five years, now inactive because of the Church's response to his son's homosexuality. Ray wept as he read of the man's wife and each of his five children following his example into inactivity. The former bishop's defiant remarks reminded Ray of a letter to the editor he'd read in the local paper. Written by a woman who'd identified herself as a fifth-generation Mormon, it had also included a calling and worthiness resume. She wrote that when forced to choose between the Church and her gay brother, it was an easy choice to reject the Church. Ray questioned why it was easy for her to know what to do, when he himself received no direction. He wondered if the former bishop and this woman were right in leaving the Church. Were they holding on to the iron rod, or were they entering the great and spacious building? Were they offering a helping hand, or were they pointing a finger of scorn? What would happen if he heeded them?

Ray wondered if he needed to go to his own children and explain that he had taught them incorrect principles since they were children. Did he need to tell them that because the Church wouldn't accept Eli's behavior and wouldn't allow him to marry, it was no longer the true Church? Did he need to say that because the prophet didn't understand the issues and was using Church funds to fight against same-sex marriage, he was no longer a true prophet? Did he need to encourage his family to leave the Church in order to love Eli? Reflecting on his earlier conversation with John, he knew that at least one child felt his father had already rejected the Church.

Ray read the letter from the former bishop again. He couldn't understand how the Church could be true throughout most of the man's life, especially during the years he had served as bishop, but false after his son came out. Ray reviewed his own life, thought of the miracles he'd seen performed by the priesthood and the countless times he'd felt the Spirit. He realized that he'd seen no miracles and felt few spiritual promptings since Eli had come out.

Rationally, he knew that the Church hadn't changed—that if it were true 16 months ago, it was still true. But the Church had provided little help and few answers since Eli's announcement. He wondered if Eli's issues and the family's struggles were beyond the reach of the Church to help and beyond the power of the Atonement to heal.

The more Ray agonized, the fiercer the contradictions burned within him. He couldn't deny that the Church was true. He loved Jesus Christ and he loved Eli, but he'd lost hope that it was possible to reconcile his faith in Christ with his love for Eli. Remembering Ethan's strong faith, he wondered why his own faith was so weak.

As he stood to leave, he noticed the flier advertising the conference on same-sex attraction Ethan had given him. Days before, he'd decided not to attend because of his fear of meeting someone he knew. Engulfed by oppressive feelings, he pulled the flier out of the garbage can and fearfully contemplated attending the conference.

CHAPTER 13

A few days later Ray sat in a dignified lobby watching well-dressed people hurry by. He had been able to register for the conference but was beginning to have second thoughts. *What am I doing here? As a family, we get along okay with Eli. Maybe I don't need to go in. What if I see someone I know? What if everyone is weird?*

Ray reflected on his family and the delicate equilibrium of their relationships. Eli and Jeff continued to visit weekly with the family. They were always perfect gentlemen. Bob and Lisa, the two children still at home, enjoyed being with both of them and looked forward to their time together. Everyone had enjoyed the family's traditional Labor Day picnic, although Ray noticed that several adults had kept a vigilant watch over Eli's nieces and nephews.

Ray loved Eli and was proud of the way he was growing and progressing. He had gotten to know Jeff better and now considered him one of his own sons. But he constantly thought about Eli's sexual orientation and wondered if he was loving and supporting his son in the right manner. Occasionally he worried that he was becoming obsessed with the burden Eli had given him. He reflected on his recent confrontation with John and thought of Mitt's counsel to love Eli unconditionally, even at the expense of his faith. And, while the thought of simply loving Eli seemed logical, and in some ways scripturally sound, he continued to feel troubled and confused.

He remembered the power of the testimonies and the witness of the Spirit he'd felt at the second support group. He thought

of Ethan's straightforward yet damning critique of the scientific proof presented at the fireside. Roberta continued to encourage him to humble himself and turn to God for answers. Ray worried that the conference would simply add fuel to the fires of confusion already burning in his soul.

As Ray stood to walk out of the building, he hesitated, unable to deny the spiritual feelings of his heart. Obeying the promptings, he entered the elevator. Relieved he didn't meet anyone he knew as he picked up his nametag and conference packet, he waited for the opening session to begin. He was surrounded by normal-looking people, embracing and happily visiting with each other. "Father in Heaven," he pleaded softly. "Give me a sign that I'm in the right place."

As he said amen, a middle-aged man sat next to him and introduced himself as Joe. "Good to meet you, Joe. I'm Ray."

Joe took Ray's hand in a firm grip, "Hello, Ray. Is this your first conference?"

"It is."

"Get ready for a spiritual treat. This is my fourth conference. I've come a thousand miles to be here, and won't miss it for anything."

"You've come a thousand miles to attend this conference? Why?"

Ray's eyes watered as Joe explained the spiritual recharge he always received from the conference. He remembered his earlier worry that the people might be weird and felt ashamed. Obviously, Joe was a good man, humble and completely committed to Jesus Christ.

As they harmonized together during the opening song, Ray felt a spiritual bond with a man he would have shunned two years earlier. The person conducting the conference observed that people from almost every state and over half a dozen foreign countries were in attendance. "Welcome, we hope each of you will be richly blessed by your attendance."

"I already have been," Ray whispered.

"What?" Joe asked.

"Nothing," Ray said, shaking his head. He turned his attention back to the speaker, ". . . I'd like to give an overview of the conference for those of you who are here for the first time.

"We believe that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, individuals can overcome their carnal nature and reach their full potential as sons and daughters of God. We're anxious to help those who desire to move away from homosexual behavior or diminish their same-sex attraction.

"Those attending for the first time will find workshops, discussion groups, information, and other resources to help you better understand same-sex attraction and move forward with life. There are also workshops and information for family, friends, professional counselors, Church leaders, and others who want to help a loved one who experiences same-sex attraction.

"Although we are not affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we sustain the doctrines and teachings of the Church. We hope all who are in attendance will feel the Spirit and be blessed in your efforts."

The words felt good to Ray, emphasizing principles that sounded true. More important, the Spirit warmed his soul. He focused again on the person conducting the meeting, ". . . After Mary shares her testimony we'll dismiss for the first workshop."

In a soft, angelic voice, Mary shared a sweet but brutally honest testimony. Ray was dumbfounded as she talked about her former life and the changes she had made. He was amazed at her desire to do what was right and humbled by her unwavering faith in Jesus Christ. Her testimony helped him put his own challenges in perspective and reminded him of Ethan's assurance that faith made many questions easier to answer.

Ray's tears flowed freely. Joe offered him a tissue that he gratefully accepted. After the testimony, Ray sat still, overcome by the feelings of the Spirit. Although the pain from his confrontation with John only days earlier was still real, he knew his prayer had

been answered: he *was* in the right place. While registering for the conference, he'd anticipated two days like the fireside he'd attended—a logical examination of facts and research to gain a better understanding of the issues surrounding same-sex attraction. What he'd found instead was a deeply spiritual approach to what he'd previously considered a worldly issue.

CHAPTER 14

Slowly settling into the chair near the classroom door, Ray waited. Most of the two dozen people in the room were women, middle-aged or older. While several were talking, most sat quietly waiting. Ray closed his eyes and relaxed. This was his first workshop, and he'd selected it because it seemed comfortable and safe. He understood the Atonement, knew it could bless Eli and help him change. Ray's goal was to learn how to get the blessings of the Atonement into Eli's life.

He was jolted out of his daydream when he heard Kurt, the instructor, invite each person to share why they'd chosen to attend the workshop. Ray considered quietly leaving, uncertain he could tell a group of strangers he was the father of a gay son. But as he listened, he began to feel the same closeness to those in the room that he'd felt with Joe.

Then it was his turn, "I'm Ray, and eighteen months ago my son came out. I've struggled to understand what's happening. I chose this workshop to learn how the Atonement can help my son." He looked to his right and relaxed as the next person started to speak.

"Thank you," Kurt said when they'd finished. "Let's begin: what's the first principle of the gospel?"

"Faith in Jesus Christ," the class responded in unison.

"That's right. How important is Jesus Christ in *your* life?"

Julie, a middle-aged woman who'd offered the opening prayer, responded, "Jesus Christ is the center of all I believe and all that I hope to become. He's my Savior, my Redeemer, my advocate with the Father."

"Thank you," Kurt replied, then asked, "Can salvation come in any way other than through Jesus Christ?"

"No."

"Prove it. What do the scriptures say?"

Barbara, a middle-aged woman sitting near the window, spoke up. "Doctrine and Covenants 29:20 says, 'And we know that all men must repent and believe on the name of Jesus Christ, and worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.'"

"Excellent," Kurt responded. "Go ahead." He pointed to Kevin, one of the few fathers in attendance.

"Nephi wrote that 'there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved.'"

Molly, a younger-looking, energetic woman, added, "The third article of faith says, 'We believe that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.'"

"Excellent. Can anyone offer us more than Jesus Christ?"

"No."

Kurt slowly surveyed the class, looking directly at each person before stopping at Ray. "Then why *don't you* look to Him for what He has to offer? In the world today, when the going gets tough, people look to family, friends, professional counselors, drugs, and a thousand other sources for help." Ray squirmed in his seat. "Brothers and sisters, have *you* looked to Jesus Christ, not only for a remission of your sins, but also for the peace, comfort, and strength you need to carry your burdens?"

As others in the room responded in the affirmative, Ray lowered his head. Although he'd prayed many times since Eli's announcement, his prayers had seldom been humble or sincere. In the beginning he'd felt that he, through his own efforts, could fix his son. About the time he'd realized that he needed help, he'd met David and Mitt. Because they seemed to have all the answers, he hadn't seriously looked to Jesus Christ for anything.

"Brothers and sisters," Kurt continued, "the Atonement can have an immediate and practical impact in your life if you will allow it. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is at the center of the great plan of happiness—the most merciful and unselfish act in all of human history. The prophets from Adam to the present day testified of Him. In fact, the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob wrote, 'I say unto you that none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ.'"

Kurt bent down and lifted a flowerpot off the floor and onto the table. Reddish-brown, a foot and a half tall, it contained a healthy crop of weeds where flowers should have been. "I'm going to use this pot to explain some ways the Atonement blesses each of our lives. In Alma, we read that Christ's sacrifice would be infinite and eternal. What are some of the infinite and eternal blessings of Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice?"

"We won't be held accountable for Adam's transgression."

"That's correct," Kurt replied as he taped a strip of paper that said "Adam's Transgression" to the flowerpot. "What else?"

Linda Lou, an older, gray-haired woman responded, "Because of Jesus Christ we'll all be resurrected."

"You've identified two unconditional blessings of the Atonement. What else does the Atonement do for us?"

"We can be forgiven of our sins," Molly replied.

"If we do what?" Kurt asked.

"If we repent," Ray replied.

"Forgiveness, then, is a conditional blessing of the Atonement. We've all sinned, so we all must repent. Alma taught, 'Ye must repent, and be born again . . . therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins.'

"Those who experience same-sex attractions or who have been involved in homosexual behavior often think they are so wicked or sinful that they can't repent. We must never forget that the Atonement is for all of Father in Heaven's children. Jesus Christ suffered in the garden for *all men*; He died on the cross for *all men*. The idea that a person can't change or repent is

one of Satan's most insidious lies. Listen to these scriptures: 'For behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of *all men*, that *all men* might repent and come unto him.' And, 'For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for *all*, that they might not suffer if they would repent.'"

He attached a label to the top third of the flowerpot that read "Forgiveness of Our Own Sins." Turning to the class, he continued, "In summary, because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ we will not be held accountable for Adam's transgression, and we will be resurrected. These two blessings of the Atonement come to each of us through no effort on our part, but are the product of God's grace. Also, because of the Atonement we can repent and be forgiven of our sins. While this requires some effort on our part, this forgiveness is also the product of God's grace and is not fully merited. Remember, 'it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.' Also, 'there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.'"

Kurt started to pull the weeds out of the flowerpot, "Only when we combine our meager efforts with the grace of God can our own sins can be removed. But remember that you can't remove the sins of your loved ones who experience same-sex attractions. Most parents want to change their child; they want to heal their son or daughter. Remember that your children have their agency, and they must choose what they do in this life. I testify, though, that God's grace is sufficient for you and for your loved ones. To this point, we've talked about the unconditional blessings of the Atonement and about pulling the weeds of sin out of our own lives. But we grow and progress in two ways: first, by removing the weeds in our lives or repenting of our sins; second, by cultivating Christlike attributes. The grace of God makes it possible to do both. What are some Christlike attributes we can cultivate?"

"Charity, mercy, meekness, forgiveness."

"Excellent! In our hymnbook is a song about the flowers of grace appearing." Kurt planted several flowers in the pot. The flowers were homemade: a gumdrop surrounded by petals cut out of construction paper and two green leaves attached to a pipe cleaner that served as the stem. Ray felt a lump in his throat as he remembered similar flowers each of the children had given to Roberta over the years.

"You mentioned charity as one of the Christlike attributes, or flowers of grace, that we want to cultivate. Moroni 7:45 tells us about charity: 'And charity suffereth long.'" Kurt looked up, "What does that mean?"

"Charity is patient," Kevin responded. "It never gives up."

"Good, so how does that relate to us and our child, spouse, or friend who experiences same-sex attraction?"

Julie spoke, "It means I will always be there for my son, no matter what."

"Even if he rejects all that you hold dear?" Kurt asked. "Even if he rejects you because you won't support his lifestyle as he thinks you should?"

"Especially if he rejects me," Julie replied with conviction. "I can't allow his actions to determine how I feel towards him, just as Christ's love for me won't diminish because of my actions."

Peter interjected, "Think of how patient Christ has been with each of us. Think of how often He's turned the other cheek or wrapped His arms of love around us, even when we're unworthy. Just talking about this inspires me to be more charitable as I interact with my son."

"Excellent point," replied Julie. "If I'm full of charity, I'll love my son as God loves him—perfectly."

Kurt replanted several weeds next to the homemade flowers, "This is more representative of our lives right now. No one has repented of all his sins; no one is perfect. One of the major manifestations of God's grace is that we can begin to develop Christlike attributes, even though we're imperfect."

"That's fine and dandy, but I feel my burdens are too heavy to bear." All turned to see Linda Lou wipe her eyes. "My husband has terminal cancer, my daughter is going through a divorce, and now my son tells me he's gay. I can't make it through the day, let alone grow flowers. Why won't God just remove my burdens?"

Ray listened intently; Roberta had asked him a similar question countless times.

"I'm sorry to hear of your challenges," Kurt replied softly. "God can remove all your burdens, although for your eternal welfare He may choose not to at this time. But He'll not forget you if you continue to trust in Him. This is illustrated in the Book of Mormon where Alma and his followers were in bondage to the Lamanites. As they prayed to God for deliverance, the Lamanites threatened them with death. But they continued to trust in God, who "did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease." Eventually God did deliver them out of bondage. I testify that God will strengthen you or He will deliver you, depending on what He, in his infinite wisdom, knows is best for you."

Linda Lou nodded in agreement, "I believe that also, but even as I try to do what's right, I feel overwhelmed. Life doesn't seem fair."

"Life isn't always fair," Julie sympathized. Opening her scriptures she continued, "An interesting parallel to our situation is the well-known story of the 2,000 stripling warriors in the Book of Mormon. They were faithful and obedient. The scriptures say they 'perform[ed] every word of command with exactness,' which placed them in the heart of the battle, standing almost alone against the entire force of the enemy. While standing firm against the enemy, two hundred of these young men fainted from the loss of blood, but 'not one soul of them did perish; yea, and neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds.'

"We're in the same situation, fighting in a great war for the souls of our children who feel same-sex attraction. As we follow

the prophet, we find ourselves in the hottest part of the battle. The forces of Satan and the world are arrayed against us. Each of us has been wounded, some many times, yet if we trust in Jesus Christ, we will never perish."

"Christ knows how you feel," Kurt added in testimony. "Please read Alma 7:11-12 with me: 'And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.'

"This scripture mentions death, temptations, 'the bands of death that bind his people'—all of which are infinite and eternal issues." Kurt's eyes shifted from Linda Lou to Ray as he continued, "The scripture then says that Christ suffered pains and afflictions of every kind, that He took upon Himself your sicknesses and your infirmities—that is very personal. Jesus Christ knows your pain. He knows your sorrow. He knows your guilt, your grief, and your fears. He knows your frustration as the good things you do seem to backfire and cause only pain and suffering. In some way, which you and I don't understand, He's felt everything you're feeling. He can heal you. He can give you peace, not someday, but right now."

"Christ has tasted all the bitterness the world has to offer and has overcome it. The Atonement is about healing. It's the answer to the pain, grief, and sorrow that you feel right now, right here." As Kurt touched his chest, Ray could feel his own heart pounding. He knew that the doctrine was true.

Kurt continued, "I am reminded of three young men that I knew. They were best friends, active in church and involved in school. All three served honorable missions. A short time after returning home, each married a beautiful young woman in the

temple. The new brides became good friends. As they attended college the three couples were often together. They all had a bright future ahead of them.

"Just over two years ago the three young men were killed in a terrible accident as they returned from a hunting trip. Of course, their parents and young brides were devastated. To this day three mothers and two of the three brides continue to struggle with the crushing loss. I talked with one mother several weeks ago who is still mourning her son's death. She cries often and continues to feel depressed. She's angry with a God who would take her son. When I pressed her, she expressed a belief that she'll see her son again. She said that at that time she'll experience joy and peace again, but not until then.

"The third young bride has moved on with her life. Her pain, her sorrow, her grief, and her loneliness have been swallowed up in Jesus Christ. She feels peace here and now. She feels God's love. She's currently preparing for a mission."

Ray raised his hand, "Earlier you mentioned that some who experience same-sex attraction don't think the Atonement applies to them. My son feels that way. How can I help him understand what you've been saying?"

Kurt looked at Ray, "That's an excellent question, and it brings up a major point of this presentation. We've already mentioned that the power and blessings of the Atonement can be significant in the life of every person on earth. But," Kurt pointed directly at Ray, "you can't control the power of the Atonement in anyone else's life. You can only control the influence of the Atonement in your own life."

Turning to the class he asked, "How many of you came to this workshop to learn how the Atonement could be a blessing in the life of your child?"

Most in attendance raised their hand.

Kurt picked up another flowerpot and placed it on the table next to the first pot. In front of the first pot, he placed a sign that had "ME" written on it. In front of the second pot, he set

a sign that said "MY CHILD." Pointing to the second pot he said, "Try as you might, you can't pull one weed out of this pot. You can't plant one flower in this pot. Your child has agency, and what happens in this pot is entirely between your child and Jesus Christ."

He pointed to the "ME" pot. "For the remainder of this workshop I want each of you to focus on yourself. The Atonement is for you, right here and right now. The Atonement is for you who have weeds and flowers in your life. You can go home today and apply everything we've talked about. Your own life can be richly blessed." During the remainder of the workshop, the tone of the comments changed. Each person began to look at the Atonement in terms of his or her own actions and burdens. Ray wrote furiously as he tried to capture the high points of the discussion. The Spirit reminded him of promptings he'd received months earlier in the temple. He knew in his own life he needed to nourish faith, meekness, and charity; he needed to uproot the weeds of pride, fear, and shame.

Ray felt the Spirit burn the truth of Kurt's statement into his heart as tears filled his eyes. He heard Barbara reading, "'Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain you.' 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.'"

For months, Roberta had been encouraging him to trust in Jesus Christ. She'd been right. Ray wondered how he'd ever been so blind.

CHAPTER 15

Softly mumbling to himself, Ray slowly walked into the next workshop. "My happiness and my peace are dependent upon my choices, not what Eli does. Mitt keeps saying I won't be happy until Eli's happy, but that's not . . . ." He froze, *Tyler! What's he doing here?* At the same moment that Ray turned to escape, he heard Tyler's deep, bass voice, "Ray Neels."

Trapped, he wished that he could simply vanish. The last person he wanted to meet at a conference on same-sex attraction was a fellow high priest from his own ward. Embarrassed, he slowly turned around. Tyler, a big smile on his face, quickly approached and vigorously shook his hand, "Good to see you, Ray. Is this your first conference?"

"This is my first conference," he answered softly. Then, marshalling all his courage, explained, "A year and a half ago my son told me he was gay."

"You came to the right place," Tyler smiled, "There's lot's of help here for parents."

As they talked, Ray tried to figure out why Tyler, who seemed perfectly at ease, was at the conference. Finally he blurted out, "Tyler, what're you doing here?"

"This workshop is a panel discussion, and I've been invited to be one of the panelists."

"I didn't know you worked with people who feel same-sex attraction."

"I don't, but I help at conferences like this and in other ways. I was in the lifestyle for years."

"You can't be gay," Ray exclaimed. "You're in my high priests group, you take the sacrament, you attend the temple—" Realizing what he'd said, Ray tried to backtrack, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have . . . I mean . . . ."

"Don't give it a second thought," Tyler cut him off. "Not many people know how I spent the early years of my life. I keep it low key for my family's sake, but I don't have a problem talking to people about my experience."

"I certainly had no idea."

Tyler continued, "I'm sure there are others in the ward who struggle with this issue. The gay rights activists say that 10 percent of the population is gay. I think the real figure is less, maybe 3 to 5 percent. But, even at the lower figures, among the 400 members of our ward, anywhere from 12 to 20 people have feelings of same-sex attraction."

"I know at least one of them."

"I'm sure there are others," Tyler smiled knowingly.

As they talked, it was obvious to Ray that Tyler understood the challenges that he and Roberta had been facing. But Tyler didn't display the fear or shame that they'd felt since the cruise. They talked for several minutes before Ray found the courage to ask the one question that was foremost on his mind, "Tyler, is change possible?"

"Absolutely! There are hundreds, if not thousands, who've left the lifestyle."

"Why don't I ever hear about them?" Ray asked. "When Eli came out, Roberta and I were bombarded on all sides by those who said he was born gay and change wasn't possible. We didn't find anyone with an opposing view."

Tyler smiled, then slowly responded, "Many of those who've moved out of the lifestyle are like me—married, with a family, involved in the church and in the community. For my wife and my children's sake, I don't make a big deal about where I used to be. When I left the lifestyle, I developed a new set of friends, new hobbies, and new interests. Now the major focus of my life

is Janice and our four wonderful children. And, as you pointed out, I also have a calling in the Church that requires my time and energy."

Ray winced, "I apologize for—"

Tyler stopped him, "Don't worry about it, I'm pulling your leg. But whenever I see you in the future, I'll remind you of your comment. Seriously though, my life is more fulfilling and meaningful now than it ever was when I was in the lifestyle. I seldom think of my previous life; it's behind me forever. I know that others who've left the lifestyle feel as I do."

"I think I understand," Ray nodded. "Tyler, I've never felt what Eli's feeling, but you have. What can I do to help him?"

"Help him in what way?"

"Help him to change, of course. Could you talk with him, help him to understand what he needs to do?"

"I'd love to talk with him, but on one condition—that he calls me and asks to visit."

"I don't think he'll do that," Ray mumbled dejectedly.

"Unless he wants to talk to me," Tyler explained, "all I'll do is alienate him more. He needs to know that you love him more than he needs to know how to change. If and when he decides to confront the issues, I'd be happy to talk with him."

"Do you know any books he could read?"

Tyler hesitated, "I can suggest several books. But I don't recommend you buy the books and ask him to read them. If you leave them on the table, where he might pick one up and read it, okay. But what he reads must be his decision."

"What can I possibly do then?" Ray asked with increasing frustration.

"You can do two things. First, strive to have the Spirit in your life and follow its promptings. Second, love your son as the Spirit directs. If Eli feels as I felt years ago, he doesn't think anyone, including God, loves him. But you can love him as Jesus Christ loves him. Tell him often and sincerely that you love him."

A man at the front of the room motioned to Tyler. "Ray, I need to go—it's time to start the workshop, but hang around after and we'll talk some more."

"Thank you."

As Ray listened to the questions and answers, he realized he still had a lot to learn. Some of the issues discussed were new to Ray, others were more complex than he'd imagined. The overall feeling, though, was one of hope through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Towards the end of the workshop, one panelist referred to Jason Park, who'd just entered the room. Ray recognized the name as the author of a book he was reading on same-sex attraction. Out of curiosity Ray looked back, only to see Frank, a business associate. "Great," Ray mumbled. "First I meet someone from the ward, now it's someone from work. What's next?" Although he was at the point where he could chuckle about his predicament, he still wished he could simply disappear.

After the workshop, Ray noticed Frank walking towards him. Seeing no place to hide, he squared his shoulders and stepped forward. As Frank took Ray's hand in a firm grip he said, "Hi, I'm Jason Park."

Ray gasped, "I can't believe this. You're gay also?"

"No, I was never gay. But for years I felt attractions to men."

Biting his tongue to keep from blurting out that Frank was married and the father of three children, Ray wondered what other surprises awaited him at the conference.

* * *

After lunch, Ray attended a workshop on the importance of touch to the emotional and physical health of a person. The instructor shared research that showed physical contact had a direct influence on a person's sense of well being. He told a story about babies in one orphanage who were healthy and strong, while those in a neighboring orphanage were sick and dying. Careful study showed that the workers in the first orphanage

held the babies every day, while workers in the second orphanage seldom touched the babies.

"In America we are touch-starved!" he exclaimed. "In some societies men hug each other every time they meet. When was the last time you hugged someone of the same sex?" Ray knew that he hugged his younger children regularly, but he hadn't hugged a grown man in years.

"Stand up," the instructor commanded, sounding like a drill sergeant. "We'll practice hugging. Take your right arm and give the person on your right a hug." Ray felt fairly comfortable giving a hug to the woman on his right. "Now take your left arm," the drill sergeant commanded, "and hug the person to your left." This time Ray hesitated before giving the man on his left a weak, halfhearted embrace. He noticed that most of the others in the room didn't experience the same trepidation he did.

"Alright," the instructor continued, "Sit down, but don't get too comfortable. We'll do more hugging before the workshop is over." As everyone sat down, Ray quietly excused himself; the thought of hugging another man was much too uncomfortable. Sitting alone in the hall, Ray remembered how much he enjoyed wrapping his young children in his arms. He realized, though, that as they grew older he had hugged them less and less, particularly his sons.

"But I hugged all my sons less and less to the same degree, so lack of touch couldn't have affected Eli," Ray reasoned half aloud. And he knew that as his sons had grown, he'd still maintained physical contact with them through daily basketball games. But, his conscience screamed, as Eli matured he'd dropped sports and turned to the piano. Ray struggled to remember the last time that he'd sat next to Eli at the piano, or even the last time he'd had any physical contact with him. Damning tears of guilt and incrimination filled his eyes as he relived his failures. Amazed at the intensity of his feelings and not wanting others to see his emotions, Ray quietly left the conference.

As he wandered aimlessly, kicking leaves and softly talking to himself, he tried to sort through his feelings. Even though he knew the conference was the right place to be, it was forcing him to confront uncomfortable issues in his own life.

"But this isn't about me," he mumbled. "This is about Eli. How do I help Eli? Where can I find the answers?" Questions and uncertainty continued to dominate his thoughts. Finally, in an effort to unwind, Ray slipped into a theater. Although he had no idea what the movie was about, he was confident it would not be about same-sex attraction. As the movie began, he sat alone in the crowded theater, emotionally worn out.

Immediately tears filled his eyes. The movie was about a father and a son, about loving and never giving up. Ray watched through wet eyes as Paul, a loving father, begged his son, Michael, not to go astray. In spite of Paul's best efforts, his son continued to choose the recognition and wealth of the world over the faith of his father. Ray imagined Paul feeling every pain and disappointment that he and Roberta had experienced.

The final parting came as Paul and Michael encountered each other going opposite directions on a dusty road. Michael was returning to the excitement and recognition of a sinful city, after successfully acquiring more of the world's wealth. Paul was leaving the same city, returning to the stability and peace of his ancestral village. Michael excitedly showed his father all the riches and bounties of the world that he had acquired. Frustrated that his father wasn't excited also, Michael asked why he wasn't happy for him.

Ray was amazed at how similar Michael's comments were to what Eli had said to him earlier in the week, "Dad, I can finally be who I really am. This is all I've ever wanted. I'm happier than I've ever been. Why can't you be happy?" Ray, unable to put his feelings into words, hadn't answered his son. Now he listened to Paul answer Michael with words plucked from the depths of his own agony. "I'm happy," Paul replied. "I'm happy because you think you've found what you've always wanted. But I'm also

sad—sad because what you've found will only bring disappointment and heartache."

As Michael shrugged and turned to leave, Paul added, "Son, although you've rejected me as your father, I'll always love you."

Ray couldn't suppress the wrenching sob that escaped from his lips. He felt Paul's grief as Michael turned from all he'd been taught. Ray's hands gripped the armrests, his mind screaming for relief. All hope died.

Ray watched Paul, silhouetted by the setting sun, slowly climb a hill above his village. Ray felt the blackness that surrounded Paul overwhelm his own dark soul. His pain intensified as Paul dropped to his knees and confessed to God that he'd failed as a father and that his son was lost forever. As before, the words were ripped out of Ray's own suffering heart. Feeling that he was forever damned, that Eli was eternally lost, Ray buried his face in his hands and sobbed. His muffled moans mingled with the piercing surround-sound crashes and screams that filled the theater.

Then silence.

Startled, Ray struggled to gain his composure. Keeping his head down, he wiped his eyes and tried to quiet his pain. Although afraid to look, afraid of more feelings of failure and damnation, the silence forced his eyes open. On the screen, he saw the Savior of the world slowly descending out of heaven. Peace and hope filled Ray's heart. As he watched the people reach out to touch the Savior, Ray felt a healing balm blanket his soul. Again, tears filled his eyes, but this time they were tears of joy and hope.

Ray saw the same tears of joy in the eyes of the loving father and his recently returned son. He heard the repentant son reverently declare his faith in Jesus Christ.

Ray's heart almost burst with pleadings that his own son might someday again believe in Christ. As he watched Christ continue to bless the people, he felt the incomprehensible peace of the Spirit purge his pain and wash away his guilt. He closed

his eyes and longed to be with his Savior, to look into His face and to touch Him.

The suffocating feelings of blackness and failure had vanished, replaced by the light and hope of Christ's Atonement. That morning he had talked about the Atonement, but now he felt the purifying and cleansing power of Christ's infinite and eternal sacrifice. His soul would never be the same.

When Ray finally opened his eyes, although the room was practically empty, he no longer felt alone.

CHAPTER 16

Ray hurried out of the elevator and into the classroom. "Darn," he muttered. After the movie, he'd taken a walk. Pondering on the thoughts and feelings of the day, he'd walked further and longer than planned. Although he'd volunteered to meet with other parents and brainstorm ideas to help youth who experience same-sex attraction, he didn't see an empty chair at either of the tables in the room. As Ray turned to leave he noticed Kurt, who'd taught the earlier workshop on the Atonement, motion to him. Elated, Ray grabbed a donut and soda from a cart near the door and hurried over to the far table.

Sitting down next to Kurt, he nodded at Julie, who he'd met at an earlier workshop. Others at the table interrupted their conversation for introductions. To his right were Mike and his wife, April, who introduced themselves as parents of a gay son. On his and Kurt's left were John and Susan, parents of a son with feelings of same-sex attraction. Sitting across from him was Max, who'd also presented a workshop that morning.

The conversation exploded back to life as Julie turned to Mike, "I can't believe that you'd do such a thing."

"I don't see anything wrong with it," Mike replied. "We know where our son is and we can continue to have a positive influence in his life. And, because the apartment is rent free, he and his partner won't have as much debt when they graduate from college."

"What'd you do?" Ray asked bewildered.

"My wife and I finished off an apartment in our basement for our son and his partner," Mike proudly explained. "Besides being a safe place to live, the apartment tells our son that we love him."

"But," Julie glared, "you're enabling your son to live a wicked lifestyle."

"Don't give me that," he objected. "Anyway, I'm not sure it's all that wicked. Christ loves our son no matter what he does."

"I feel that way also," added April. "That's what unconditional love is."

"Hold that thought for just a minute," Max interjected. He pulled a piece of paper from his briefcase and laid it on the table. Everyone watched as he drew a line from the upper right-hand corner to the lower left-hand corner of the paper. He looked up, "I envision love as a continuum." He pointed to the upper right-hand corner, "This represents the best love we know of. What do we call it?"

"Charity, or the pure love of Christ."

He wrote "charity" on the paper, pointed at the low end of the line, and asked, "What do we call the love in this bottom corner?"

"Selfish love."

"Lust."

Max wrote the suggestions on the bottom of the paper. "What kinds of love go between these two extremes?"

"Brotherly love," volunteered John.

"Good, where does it go?" Max asked, retracing the line with his pen.

John eyed the line thoughtfully, "Three quarters of the way up?"

Max looked around, "Does everyone agree?" Everyone did. He wrote "Brotherly love" on the paper.

"Romantic love, halfway up the line."

"Conditional love, put it just above lust."

"Unconditional love," said Mike. "Put it by Christlike love."

"Why there?" Kurt inquired.

"Why not there?" Mike replied with a look of disbelief. "Christlike love and unconditional love are the same."

"No, they're not," Max replied. "Christlike love or charity is defined in the scriptures by prophets of God. The term

'unconditional love' isn't even found in the scriptures. Mike, what's your definition of unconditional love."

"It means loving someone, no matter what they do."

"Who sets the terms of unconditional love?"

Julie quickly spoke up, "My son defined the terms of unconditional love in our relationship. After he came out, we were always arguing about how I should treat him. He said I needed to love him unconditionally, but according to him, I could never get it right. One day I asked him to define unconditional love. He said it meant I needed to accept him just the way he was, that I must never allow him to feel guilty or ashamed of his feelings or actions. While he made his own choices, I was responsible to shield him from the consequences of his choices. He expected me to be his advocate; he expected that I would step in and protect him from everyone who disagreed with him."

Max nodded, "The person receiving unconditional love always defines the terms of that love. Julie, if you as the giver of unconditional love, place a single boundary or restriction on your love, it's no longer unconditional. Has anyone else had a similar experience?"

Susan laughed, "John and I had an unconditional love experience last month with our 17-year-old son. We'll role play the experience for you: I'll be the mother, and John will be the son."

John messed his hair with both hands, then trying to suppress a smile, looked at Susan, "Mother, do you love me?"

"Why son, you know that I love you."

"Do you want to show me how much you love me?"

Susan laughed again as she looked around the table, "I'm still amazed that I didn't pick up on what was happening." She turned to her husband and theatrically replied, "Oh son, I do want to show you how much I love you."

John shrieked with delight, "Then buy me that red sports car I've been talking about."

Susan playfully recoiled, "I can't do that. That car costs over $30,000."

"But you said you loved me," John retorted, a pained look on his face. "Tony and Bobbie's parents just gave them new cars."

"My dear, dear son," Susan tenderly intoned. "There are some things you need to do, such as improve your grades and get a job. Then dad and I might help you buy an old used car."

"Things *I* need to do?" John moaned, "I thought you loved me without any conditions. Why don't you just come out and say that you hate me?"

Everyone laughed.

Obviously more focused on accomplishing their assignment, those at the other table asked for quiet.

"Sorry," John apologized. He smoothed his hair, then added in hushed tones to those around the table, "For the next two weeks, all we heard from our son was that we didn't love him."

"Why didn't you just give him a car, even an old junker?' Mike asked.

"Giving a child a car may be right for some," Susan explained. "But to give our 17-year-old son a car at this time in his life wouldn't be good; in fact, it could be harmful to him."

"I think we all have our unconditional love horror stories," chuckled Julie. "My daughter wants me to send her to a college on the coast. Normally that wouldn't be a problem, but she has some party-animal friends going to the same college. I told her if she wanted to pay her own way, there was nothing I could do, but I'm not going to facilitate her."

"And she feels you don't love her?" asked Max.

"I've heard that several times. She honestly feels her friend's parents love their daughters more than I love her."

Kurt added, "I have a neighbor whose daughter was on drugs. The worst thing she could have done for her daughter was to give her the drugs she wanted or money to buy drugs. And that cart full of sweets by the door reminds me of another situation

in which unconditional love can be harmful. My two youngest children would eat hamburgers and ice cream for every meal if I allowed it."

April chuckled in agreement, "We've been through that. Our children think we're the world's meanest parents when we make them eat their vegetables."

"Why don't you just give them anything they want?" Max asked.

"It wouldn't be healthy for them. They'd get fat, their arteries would clog, and they'd die years earlier than if they took care of themselves."

"I think we'd all agree," Max summarized, "that giving a person anything and everything, or enabling certain behavior, can be harmful and even dangerous."

Ray spoke up, "One problem I have with unconditional love is that people assume I know all about it. After my son came out, a dozen people told me to love him unconditionally. They just assumed that I knew perfectly what, when, where, and how to love my son. To be honest, I had no idea what to do. After listening to this conversation, I realize that I could never love my son 'unconditionally' until *he* defined it for me."

Max nodded in agreement, "A large part of any person's ability to love in a healthy manner is based on his or her own love experiences. I recently attended an interesting play that highlighted some real-life issues parents' face in trying to love a gay child. The action of the play takes place immediately after the funeral of a gay man who had committed suicide.

"In the play, the mother of the dead man was in denial. She felt her son wasn't responsible for being gay—it was all her fault. Either she gave him the gay gene or she smothered him. She blamed herself, she hated herself, and she blamed and hated her son's partner, although she'd never met him. She wasn't sure that her husband had ever loved her, believing they'd only married because of her mother-in-law's scheming. I got the impression she had never loved herself or felt that she was a

person of worth. She could find some peace though, because she knew of a time when her husband had let down his guard with another woman.

"At the same time, her husband, the father of the dead man, felt that he'd been a coward, a hypocrite, and a failure as a father and husband. During the play, he was able to confront issues in his life and increase his ability to love and accept others. Even with his progress there was still much room for growth."

"The truth is, there are no perfect parents," Kurt noted. "Every parent has had good and bad experiences with love. These experiences will affect his or her ability to love a child in a healthy manner. Max, I saw the same play. To me, the message was that we must get over our church-induced hang-ups and phobias; only then can we love correctly. I still feel, however, that unconditional love isn't always healthy love.

"I agree," Max responded. "Unconditional love, or giving a person anything they want, can be unhealthy. Christ's love on the other hand is always healthy, for both the giver and the receiver. Jesus Christ loves each of us. His love is infinite, eternal, and perfect. He came to earth, suffered in the Garden, and died on the cross because of His love for us. However, His love, which some in the Church have called divine love, has never condoned unrighteous behavior nor has it ever promised the same blessings to the wicked as to the righteous.

"In the scriptures are numerous verses that point out the conditional nature of Christ's love and His blessings. Here's one example: 'He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.' As I read the next verse, I'll add the word 'then' to emphasize the conditional relationship:

"'*If* a man love me, [*then*] he will keep my words: and my Father will love him.'

"'*If* ye keep my commandments, [*then*] ye shall abide in my love. . . .'

"'*If* thou wilt do good, yea, and hold out faithful to the end, [*then*] thou shalt be saved in the kingdom of God, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God; for there is no gift greater than the gift of salvation.'

"Although the scriptures contain numerous examples of Christ's love for us, He never condoned unrighteous behavior." Max turned to April, "What's one example of Christ's love in the scriptures?"

April thought for a moment, "The woman taken in adultery. She had sinned, but Christ didn't condemn her."

Max nodded, "That's right, Christ loved her in spite of her sin, but what did He tell her to do?"

"He told her to go, but to sin no more."

"That's right," Max continued. "Christ also told Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery that He didn't condemn them, but to go forward and not sin. God loved the people who lived at the time of Noah so much that He looked upon them and wept. He allowed Noah to preach repentance to them for 120 years before He destroyed them with the flood. Mike, why was God so harsh; why didn't He just continue to let them do what they wanted?"

Mike slowly responded, "I guess He couldn't condone their behavior."

"That's how I see it," Max agreed. "Other examples are the people who lived in the cities of Ammonihah and Sodom and Gomorrah. God loved the people in those cities, even sent prophets to warn them, but eventually destroyed them because of their behavior. Remember that God loves all His children, but all are accountable to Him for their actions. King David, characterized in the Bible as a man after the Lord's own heart, is another example. By God's blessing, he became Israel's greatest king. But after David broke two of the Ten Commandments, God sent Nathan the prophet to hold him accountable and to call him to repentance. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord informed Joseph Smith that David had fallen from his exaltation. Where's the unconditional love in that?"

"So what does that mean to us?" asked Mike. "Do we destroy our wayward children?"

"No," Max laughed. "It means we love them as God loves them. That's where charity comes in. Man defines unconditional love; God defines charity. Listen to His definition found in chapter 7 of Moroni: 'And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things . . . wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail—But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.'" Max laid down his scriptures and looked around the table, "Did you hear anything that impressed you?"

"Yes," replied April, "charity doesn't think evil or rejoice in iniquity. Therefore, charity would never condone or enable unrighteous behavior. At the same time, charity is long-suffering and never fails, so it would never give up on a person."

"Obviously, charity is important," agreed Ray. "How do I develop charity in my life?"

"That's an excellent question," replied Max. "Verse 48 instructs us to 'pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ.' Charity is a gift from God. He gives it to those who desire it, pray for it, and are true followers of His Son, Jesus Christ."

Ray looked up from taking notes, "Okay then, I have another question: what does it mean to be a true follower of Jesus Christ?"

Several people responded, "Jesus Christ taught that the first commandment is to love God. He also said that if we loved Him, we must keep His commandments."

"It means we keep our temple covenants."

"A true follower of Christ will assist God in His work 'to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.'"

"Good answers," Max observed. "In order to receive the gift of charity, a person must be furthering God's work as God directs. That's why a father who rejects the Church or the prophet in order to love his son or daughter also rejects the gift of charity."

"What does it mean to be possessed of charity?" Julie asked.

This time Kurt responded, "It can mean that I possess charity or that charity possesses me. If charity possesses me, then it will be an integral part of my soul. Like being possessed by an evil spirit—only in this case, I'm possessed by a Christlike attribute that influences how I love others. Mike, what's your son's name?"

"Peter."

"How long have you known your son?"

"For 23 years."

"How long have his Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ known him?"

"Who knows?" Mike grumbled. "But I know where you're going—I'm sure they know him better than I do."

"They know him better than he knows himself," Kurt agreed. "If Christ were on the earth today, He would love Peter in a healthy manner that would help him to realize his eternal potential, although He would never deprive Peter of his agency. He would help him understand that he is a child of God and can become like his Father. However, Christ is not on the earth, but Mike, you are. If you are possessed of charity and have the Spirit in your life, you can love Peter as Christ does."

"What you're saying," Mike deadpanned, "is that with Christ I can be a better lover than without Him."

Again everyone laughed, only quieter than before.

"That's right," Max agreed, "although maybe not in the way that it comes across. But He can guide you to do and say exactly what Peter needs, things you'd never think of on your own. Besides helping Peter, He can help you. Jesus Christ also knows you better than you know yourself. He has felt your pain and

anguish. He can lift your burdens and heal your heart; He can make you whole. If you can feel His peace in your heart, you can better share it with Peter."

"Mike, you know that's true," April admitted reluctantly. "No matter how hard we try to hide our emotions from Peter, he knows exactly what we're feeling. If we could have Christ's love and peace in our lives, Peter would feel it."

Ray spoke, "I know that Christ's Spirit can guide us in our interactions with our children. A short time ago, my youngest son asked me what to say to his friends who ask if Eli is gay. My first response was to give him a dialogue that would explain what his brother is feeling, why he feels the way he does, and so forth. Then the Spirit whispered, 'Tell him to ask Eli what he would like him to say.' I don't know what Eli told his younger brother, but I feel that the Spirit inspired me to say what I did."

"Mike, we need to change," April implored. "Our unconditional love isn't going to help Peter."

"I still—"

"Brothers and sisters, I hate to interrupt, but we need to prepare this room for another activity."

Ray looked up to see his neighbor, Tyler. "No problem. We're almost through."

"Good timing," Tyler smiled. "By the way, what suggestions could you share with me to help youth who experience same-sex attraction?"

"Only one," Ray replied seriously. "Love them as Christ would love them."

* * *

Although exhausted when he finally arrived home, Ray excitedly shared with Roberta what he'd learned. He told her about the people he'd met, the workshops he'd attended, and with limited success, the emotional highs and lows he'd experienced. He talked about the feelings of the Spirit and the softening of his heart, but couldn't communicate the overwhelming pain or

the incomparable peace he'd felt. She listened intently, asked numerous questions, and felt relieved to hear ideas compatible with the gospel.

When Ray finished, Roberta sat quietly pondering. Finally she asked, "So, sweetie, where are we now?"

Ray sat silently looking at his feet, unable to put his feelings into words.

"Are you okay? Did you hear me?" she inquired.

"Yes," he replied in a thoughtful voice. "You asked where I think we are now. Honestly, I don't know. It's one thing for me to understand and talk about issues and concepts. It's an entirely different matter to internalize what I've learned and to allow the Spirit to change my heart.

"I feel like I did years ago when I woke up following my emergency operation. Between the pain medication and the drugs, I had no idea where I was. I remember looking out of the window at the gray, overcast sky, not knowing if it was morning or evening. I couldn't tell from the leafless trees or the yellow grass whether nature was shutting down for a long, cold winter or just beginning to wake up to the promise of spring."

Roberta looked at her husband, puzzled, "That was a long time ago. I can't remember when you had your operation."

"It was early spring," Ray explained thoughtfully, "but I awoke at sunset; there was still a long, dark night to endure."

"Is that what we still face?"

"I don't know; we don't have God's calendar so we'll have to be patient." Ray sighed, forcing a tired smile. "Right now I honestly don't know if we're still facing a long, dark night and cold winter or if we'll soon see sunshine and springtime."

"I'm ready for the sunshine and springtime," Roberta said softly.

"So am I," Ray agreed, then with conviction added, "I don't know when the light and warmth will come, but I know it will."

"Can it come tomorrow?" Roberta's own tired smile quickly faded, replaced with a haunting weariness. "I'm exhausted."

CHAPTER 17

Ray rolled from his bed, put his feet on the floor, and slowly stood up. He paused to gain his balance, then hesitantly moved forward, his eyes straining to focus in the dim light. After a night of mind-numbing hyperactivity, he felt his brain finally falling asleep. "Ouch!" he muttered as his shoulder struck the bathroom doorjamb. His shoulder hurt, but he was awake.

How do I stop my senseless dreaming? Ray wondered. In his dreams, he was always searching for solutions to Eli's challenge. Occasionally he'd found an answer. But each time he would lovingly cradle the answer in his hands, it would slowly evaporate or turn to sand and quickly slip through his fingers. At night, his body slowed down, but his mind accelerated.

He shook his head and turned on the bathroom light. Instantly his eyes snapped shut. *Oh, that's bright. What am I going to do? How can I help him?*

In the weeks since the conference, Ray had felt certain that if he were faithful everything would work out. Immersing himself in prayer, scripture study, and temple attendance had improved his outlook on life and strengthened his family relationships. Ray knew that Eli had to make his own decisions but hoped that his own faithfulness would somehow influence his son.

Dropping to his knees, he began to pray, "Father in Heaven, please . . . help Eli. Bless him with . . . ."

As he prayed he slowly drifted asleep. Instantly new thoughts filled the void. *Eli's not getting better, he's not . . .*

Jerking awake, he continued mumbling, "Father, I pray that thou wilt make Eli stronger than his . . ."

Eli's a slave to his . . .

Struggling to control his thoughts, he pleaded, "Father, forgive me for my lack of faith. Bless me . . ."

If my faith were strong enough, Eli would already be healed . . .

Ray awoke with a jerk, *What's that pain? My shoulder. Why does my shoulder hurt? Father, please bless Eli . . .*

Forcing himself to concentrate, Ray finally ended his prayer, "Heavenly Father, bless Eli; bless all of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

Ray opened his eyes. Pulling himself off his knees, he looked in the mirror and gasped, "You look awful." Quickly he jumped in the shower. The hot water felt good, relaxing his tired body. His mind went blank as the hot water danced on his balding head and cascaded down his back. For a moment, even his shoulder quit throbbing.

Father, bless Eli. Help him . . .

Ray vigorously dried himself.

Father in Heaven, be with Eli, comfort him . . .

He cut himself while shaving, but the sharp pain on his chin soon subsided, replaced by the continual throbbing in his shoulder. *Dear Heavenly Father, Eli's in pain, help him . . .*"

The morning was beautiful. The air was crisp and invigorating as Ray walked the two blocks to the bus stop. As he'd done countless mornings before, he pondered out loud, "I've got to get my mind off Eli. I know it's not healthy to focus on him all the time. What can I think about instead?" Even as he pondered his own question, his thoughts reverted to his son. *I wonder what Eli will do after he wakes up? Please help him, Father. Touch . . .*

Ray shook his head vigorously and mumbled, "Unbelievable—I can't go two minutes without thinking of Eli. But what else can I think about? What thoughts, what ideas are more powerful than my concern for Eli?" He waved at his neighbor retrieving the morning paper in her nightgown. Too engrossed

in his own thoughts to notice her embarrassment, he continued to think about Eli. *This is a great neighborhood to live in. Eli had great teachers and youth leaders. If they only knew . . .* He sensed "The Blackness"—negative and suffocating feelings that seemed intent on destroying him. He'd first experienced the blackness several weeks earlier. It had been a small cloud encroaching on his renewed spirituality. Now it attacked his soul with hurricane force winds, blocking the sun, replacing light and warmth with icy gales and suffocating darkness.

Last night when the blackness enveloped him, Ray had felt encased in a huge black tomb. As his fear began to grow, he'd searched frantically for a way out. Trapped and terrified, he'd sobbed uncontrollably, his body jerking. Sure that not even God knew his agony, he'd fallen asleep. Later, as he awoke, the suffocating feelings had continued, although not as strong.

That morning as the blackness intruded into his thoughts, Ray was fortunate to be outdoors. Taking deep breaths and offering a silent prayer, he battled the feelings. As they dissipated, he thanked God. At night, when the sun was down and he was thinking about Eli's lack of progress, the blackness was overpowering. He feared he was going crazy.

The bus was late. Ray continued to think about Eli, each thought bringing a plea to his heart and mind, *Father in Heaven, bless Eli . . .*

* * *

Work was more chaotic than usual. With thoughts of Eli constantly occupying his mind, Ray was unable to focus. Although he faced a major deadline, he spent the morning running from one crisis to another. That afternoon when Tony, his boss, dropped by, Ray was still fighting fires. As Ray explained the problems he faced, Tony exploded, "Everyone has more work than they can do, everyone has problems, but unless you have a child dying, you have no excuses. Suck it up and get your work done. I expect the project to be done tomorrow!"

Ray was devastated. He'd always been a conscientious employee, carrying a disproportionate share of the work. He looked at his desk, overwhelmed. He tried to concentrate, but Toni's comments about dying children kept echoing in his ears.

"I do have a dying child," Ray muttered. "Eli's dying . . . why can't he be dying from cancer?" He paused, ashamed. *But if Eli were dying from cancer, I'd be home with him right now. Everyone here would be feeling my pain. I wouldn't have this stupid project.*

Unconsciously Ray pleaded, *Father in Heaven, bless Eli that he will get cancer . . .*

"No," Ray moaned aloud, "that's not right." Wiping away his tears, he softly began to pray, "Father, please bless Eli . . . and bless me."

* * *

Everyone was in bed when Ray arrived home late that night. While grateful for the quiet, knowing that no one had waited up for him added to his feelings of isolation and loneliness. He was exhausted, carrying more than could be expected of any man. And no one cared.

Out of habit, he wrote a few lines in his journal. As he closed the book, his eyes rested on a tab he had affixed to an entry recorded two weeks earlier. He didn't need to read the entry. He knew what it said. He also knew that since then, the burdens he carried had grown heavier and heavier. Even as a part of him begged to put the book away, another part opened the journal to the tabbed entry.

His mind recoiled at what he'd written. From his experience at the conference he knew the words on the page weren't true. But he was exhausted, tired of pushing back. *Just agree that the world is right,* he thought, *that Eli was born this way. Say the Church is wrong. Admit defeat. Admit . . . that nothing's working. You've tried, but . . . . There's nothing more . . . to do, nothing more . . . to try . . . oh, stop trying . . . end the pain . . . .*

CHAPTER 18

Ray sat at the kitchen table, books spread out in front of him. He knew it was almost midnight, and he worried it was too late to work on a Sunday School lesson. But he was also afraid to go to bed; the night before had been one of the worst nights of his life. Work that day had been only slightly better. Tony hounded him relentlessly, looking for any excuse to criticize him. Ray wanted to quit but knew he'd never find another job that paid as well, especially at his age. He didn't dare share his concern with Roberta that he might be fired. She had enough problems without him adding to them. He had to be strong, even if it was an act.

A weak smile crossed Ray's lips as he muttered, "This family is quite a group of actors. For years, Eli put on an act to hide his feelings of same-sex attraction. Since the cruise, Roberta and I have acted as if everything's okay in our dysfunctional family. Now I've added another dimension to the play, acting to deceive my wife into believing all is well in my life." But his acting had helped Ray survive another day, no small accomplishment considering the blackness.

Opening the Book of Mormon, he began to read softly, "'Have ye any that are sick among you? Bring them hither. Have ye any that are lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leprous, or that are withered, or that are deaf, or that are afflicted in any manner, bring them hither and I will heal them, for I have compassion upon you; my bowels are filled with mercy . . . and he did heal them every one as they were brought forth unto him.'"

Ray slapped the table, "If Christ could heal all of them, why can't He heal Eli? Why . . . isn't my faith strong enough? Aren't my prayers and fasting on his behalf acceptable?"

Ray took a deep breath. His hand ached. He listened for stirrings from the bedrooms, felt relief that he hadn't wakened anyone. Closing his eyes, he pleaded with a God who seemed far away, "Father, forgive my lack of faith. Heal my son. I'll never ask for another blessing in my life." Feeling the blackness gathering, he begged God to drive it away. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He thought of Eli, moving forward in his new lifestyle, while he floundered, trapped in a swamp of fear and pity. He continued to plead for strength and direction but did so with less hope and faith than in the past. The Spirit, which felt so strong and comforting immediately after the conference, now seemed far away.

Refocusing on his Sunday School lesson, Ray read about the Savior's visit to the Nephites after His resurrection, and longed to feel the comfort and peace that those righteous people had felt. He reviewed Christ's commandment after blessing the bread and giving it to the people: "And this shall ye do in *remembrance* of my body, which I have shown unto you. And it shall be a testimony unto the Father that ye do *always remember me*. And if ye do *always remember me* ye shall have my Spirit to be with you."

The words that Ray had unconsciously emphasized filled his soul. He heard a voice, "Ray, this is what you've forgotten. You always remember your son, but you never remember Me." The voice seemed so real that Ray instinctively turned to see who'd spoken. He was alone. But the Spirit warmed his soul. What he'd heard was true—for weeks he'd constantly remembered his son but had seldom remembered *The Son*.

He read further as Christ administered the wine: "And this shall ye always do to those who repent and are baptized in my name; and ye shall do it in *remembrance* of my blood, which I have shed for you, that ye may witness unto the Father that ye do *always remember me*. And if ye do *always remember me* ye shall have my Spirit to be with you"

Ray consciously emphasized the idea of remembering as the Spirit continued to warm his soul. "Always remember Him," he repeated. "A principle so simple and basic. Why haven't I understood this before?" To his mind, the Spirit softly answered, "Your struggles have finally humbled you enough to be taught."

He reflected on scriptures and thoughts the Spirit had led him to during the previous weeks. Ray felt a new power within him. Standing up, he looked at the couch across the room and began to speak as if he were teaching his Sunday School class. "Brothers and Sisters, please turn to section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants and read verse 36 with me." Turning to a scripture the Spirit had recently helped him find, he read, "'Look unto me in *every thought*: doubt not, fear not.' Now class, turn to section 121, verses 45 and 46." Ray began to read, emphasizing the words that now made his body tingle, "'Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let *virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly*.'"

Again surveying his imaginary class he testified, "Virtuous thoughts always center on Jesus Christ, not on your problems or fears." He paused, overwhelmed by the truths he was learning. Finally he continued, "Beautiful blessings have been promised to those who let virtue garnish their thoughts unceasingly: 'Then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion . . . .'"

Directing his imaginary class to section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, he read the blessing on the bread, "'and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and *always remember him* . . . that they may always have his Spirit to be with them.'" Then he read the blessing on the water "'and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they do *always remember him*, that they may have his Spirit to be with them.'"

With tears in his eyes, Ray finished his impromptu lesson to his imaginary class, "Brothers and Sisters, each week as we partake of the sacrament, we are reminded of our covenant to always remember the Savior. Nephi taught that God will always provide a way to keep His commandments. It is possible to keep our covenant to always remember Jesus Christ. When we do, we will have His Spirit to be with us. To this I bear testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

Ray took a deep breath. Since Eli's announcement, he'd experienced countless highs and lows. But right then, he felt as if he had arrived at a spiritual peak from which he could see forever. He imagined higher peaks still ahead, but sensed he was standing on the highest spiritual ground of his life.

Laying his scriptures on the counter, Ray softly questioned, "Am I learning these things because of Eli's pain and suffering? Was Eli born gay for my sake?" His emotions began to swell up within him. The Spirit whispered, "All men have agency. Choose to always remember the Savior. Recognize that you're standing on higher ground because of His loving grace and mercy." Tears of gratitude and joy washed his cheeks. Now he understood that his fasting and prayers were part of his continuing but subtle effort to control Eli. He had to quit obsessing about Eli and focus on the Savior.

Ray wandered out onto the balcony. He shivered momentarily in the crisp fall night. After a stifling hot summer, the cooler weather was refreshing. Although he felt insignificant as he gazed at the twinkling stars in the endless sky, he knew for the first time in weeks that God was aware of him. He remembered stepping onto the same balcony years before, feeling a similar assurance that God knew and loved him. Ray closed his eyes and remembered a time when his family was younger. The newest member of the family, a baby boy named Eli, had been sick and fussy for several days. Around midnight, Ray had taken the baby from Roberta, changed his diaper, then fed and burped him.

Ray loved spending one-on-one time with his newborn children. He'd sing "I Am a Child of God" to them and talk with them about heaven. That night as he rocked Eli, he'd mused, "You know, son, you were with Father in Heaven only a short time ago. What was He like? Tell me about Jesus Christ. Did He hug you as you left Him to come to earth?" Gently holding the baby's small hand in his own, he'd asked, "Did you touch Him with this hand?" Eli smiled and relaxed deeper into his arms.

Ray had been up the night before with another child, so he was grateful when Eli fell asleep. After laying him down, Ray stood silently by the bed, caught up in the peace of the moment. *What a precious gift from God*, he thought. *How I love you!*

Eli coughed. Ray's heart sank, and he closed his eyes and pleaded for the coughing to stop. As the coughing continued, Ray gently picked Eli up. After walking, singing, and talking for what seemed liked hours, Ray again laid the baby down.

Almost immediately, Eli started coughing. Ray pleaded with God for relief. He picked Eli up and together they fell asleep in the rocker. Shortly after three o'clock, Ray awoke and laid Eli in bed again. Ray prayed and waited—the baby seemed sound asleep. But as Ray quietly closed the bedroom door, he heard another cough. He groaned, too tired, too spent to hold Eli any longer.

The coughing continued, and Ray knew Eli would soon be screaming. He quickly entered the room, but this time, instead of reaching for the baby, his hands were guided to Eli's small head. Surprising himself, Ray began in a soft voice, "Eli Neels, by the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood I bless you that your cough will stop and that you will have a restful night's sleep. I do this in the name of Jesus Christ . . . ."

Before Ray had said amen, the coughing had stopped. He slowly lifted his hands and looking down in amazement. He had always believed in priesthood power and priesthood blessings, but he'd never felt so connected to the source of that power or so near the result of its righteous use. He felt as if he could literally touch Eli with one hand, and reach up and touch God with the

other. After the blessing, Ray had stood on that same balcony and with tears in his eyes had thanked God.

Now, 22 years later, as he opened his eyes, his cheeks were again wet. "God does know me. He does love me," he reminded himself. He knew that Christ was aware of the confusion and pain he'd been feeling. Ray felt unworthy. Again the Spirit whispered to his soul, "Always remember your Savior."

He went to bed and quickly fell asleep. As in previous nights, his mind immediately began searching for ways to help Eli. But this time, interspersed in the search were thoughts of Christ. The scriptures Ray had read earlier in the evening began to fill his mind. As his mind focused more and more on the Savior, the frantic searching ended and he fell into a restful sleep.

When Ray awoke the next morning, his first thoughts were of Eli. Then, remembering the peace of the night before, he began softly reciting a favorite scripture from his Seminary days: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy path." The Spirit burning within him whispered that God would indeed direct him.

As Ray dressed and thoughts of Eli entered his mind, he began to sing aloud, "I know that my Redeemer lives, What comfort this sweet sentence gives!" For the first time in weeks, Ray felt comfort.

During the day, whenever Ray began to think of Eli, he would focus on Jesus Christ—he sang hymns, recited scriptures, pondered Christ's teachings, and prayed. When he went to bed that night, he felt wrapped in God's arms. This time as he slept, Ray dreamed he was falling. His anxiety increased as the ground rushed up to meet him. Unconsciously his mind began to replay the hymns and scriptures that had filled his thoughts throughout the day. Gradually the free fall stopped, and, in total control, he settled softly to the ground.

CHAPTER 19

Ring! Ring!

"Hold on," Ray mumbled to himself as he threw the door open.

"Hi, Ray."

"Jessica!" Ray gasped. "What're you doing here?"

"I'm here to pick up the voucher for the free cruise."

"No way, Sister. Roberta and I are using it some day."

"Right," Jessica laughed. "I'm really here to talk with you about holding a family reunion."

"That's a great idea!" Ray exclaimed, stepping onto the porch and giving his sister a bear hug. "I love you."

"Whoa, tiger!" Jessica gasped. "When did you start hugging people?"

"During the conference on same-sex attraction."

Jessica stepped back, looked at her brother, "I think that's the first time you've ever hugged me. It feels strange, but I like it."

"Great! It's a fact that people feel better when they have regular physical contact with others." Ray spoke with authority, then continued sheepishly, "I failed the hugging workshop at the conference, but if you liked that hug, I must be getting better."

"You did great; from now on I expect a hug every time I see you."

"You got it, Sis. Why don't you come in, it's cold out here."

"Thank you."

"So, how's your family?" Ray asked as he closed the door.

"We're all doing well. And you?"

"The children are active and healthy; Roberta's still sewing every waking minute." Ray laughed. "I can't complain, though. She donates most of what she sews to the women at the domestic abuse shelter."

"She's an amazing woman."

"So are you, Sis. How's Paul doing?"

"Much better. He's finally getting on top of his problem."

"That's wonderful! I know it's been a challenge for both of you."

"It has been. Thanks for listening and encouraging me when I was ready to give up."

"Don't mention it. Families are supposed to support each other."

"True, but thank you anyway," Jessica replied sincerely. "Paul's addiction almost tore the family apart. A good counselor finally helped him realize he couldn't overcome the issue on his own. The counselor also helped me understand what I couldn't control and how I was enabling him. Paul still thinks he was born with a susceptibility to pornography. He works with guys who view it often, but it doesn't seem to affect them the way it does Paul."

"I guess that's one of Paul's challenges. He'll just have to be careful."

"Everyone has a challenge or two in this life," Jessica agreed. "By the way, outside of the hugging, how was the conference you attended?"

"It was life changing," Ray smiled. "You know how I struggled after Eli came out; I didn't know what to do. I was confused and depressed. For the first time in my life, I felt I couldn't solve a problem I faced. But at the conference, I met people who'd taken control of their lives and were moving forward. Much like you in relation to Paul's pornography issue, I learned what I could and couldn't do. Although I learned a lot, I still didn't understand everything. After the conference, I went into a religious frenzy. Then, about two weeks ago," Ray paused, bit his lip, "I had a

profound spiritual experience. I was finally humble enough for the Spirit to teach me."

When he didn't continue, Jessica queried, "Teach you what?"

"How important Jesus Christ is in my life. Now I focus on Him rather than on Eli's situation or my own problems."

"You do seem happier than the last time I saw you."

"I am," Ray smiled. "For months I tried responding to Eli's attractions according to the world's teachings, and got nowhere. But now that I've tried to tune out the world and focus on the Savior, everything's changed. I've found there is power, actual power, in always remembering Jesus Christ."

"Like we promise to do when we take the sacrament?"

"Exactly! I thought I was helping Eli by thinking about him all the time. Well, that didn't help him and it hurt me. When my focus shifted to the Savior, things changed."

Jessica looked at her brother intently. "I can sense a change. Last time I was here, just before the conference, you were moody and depressed. I was concerned about you. Later when I mentioned it to Steve, he said you were depressed because you were getting ready to attend the conference."

Ray laughed, "Our brother never was much of a psychologist. I was struggling because I was depending on the world to help me. The conference helped me to depend on Christ."

"I don't think that Steve likes the group that sponsored the conference."

"He doesn't, and I don't understand why."

"Don't they force homosexuals to change?"

"Absolutely not," he chuckled. "They provide educational resources and support to anyone who voluntarily seeks to diminish their same-sex attractions. They also support the right of men and women to choose how they will respond to their attractions. Ironically, other organizations are working to make it illegal for professional counselors to help people who are uncomfortable with their homosexual feelings."

Now it was Jessica's turn to laugh, "That sounds like Satan's plan to deprive people of their agency."

"You're right," Ray nodded. "Satan would take away everyone's choices, while the Church and those who sponsored the conference support the right of everyone to choose."

"What *does* the Church say to those with attractions to the same sex?"

"Come on, Sis. I think you've heard the same things I have over the years."

"I'm sure I have, but I was a little closed-minded in the past."

"More than a little," Ray smiled. "The simplest statement is that the Church loves everyone, including those who experience same-sex attraction. Every person on earth has Christlike attributes as well as problems and challenges. Some have physical challenges while others have emotional or physiological challenges. Some have powerful susceptibilities or attractions that may be hard to control. But no matter what the situation, everyone is welcomed."

"Everyone is truly welcomed in the Church?" Jessica asked in disbelief.

"Absolutely! The mission of the Church is to invite *everyone* to 'come unto Christ, and be perfected in him.' As members of God's true Church, we have a central responsibility in furthering that mission. The Lord has commanded us to reach out with kindness and understanding to everyone."

"Is that the same as every member a missionary?"

"It's more than being a missionary," Ray chuckled. "We're to actively reach out and help everyone we meet. Although the Church welcomes everyone, it cannot condone unrighteous or immoral behavior and over the years has spoken out on moral issues. But the position the Church takes on a moral issue is no excuse for us to be intolerant or unkind toward any person. Our duty is to help and strengthen all our brothers and sisters."

Jessica nodded thoughtfully, "Now that you mention it, I've never heard a hateful or unkind statement from the Church. The statements are always positive and uplifting, full of love and hope."

"That's exactly what I've heard over the years," Ray agreed.

Jessica frowned, "So why does Steve always tell me the Church hates gays and lesbians?"

Ray sighed, "Remember that Steve won't be satisfied until the Church recognizes same-sex marriages. In the past, there may have been misunderstandings in the Church regarding same-sex attraction. That's changing. There's certainly a better understanding today of the difference between attractions and behavior. Church leaders have pointed out that attractions do not make a person unworthy to participate in Church activities. But behavior is a different issue. The Church has never condoned immoral behavior."

Jessica nodded, "God's moral standards never change."

"That's right. His standards are the same for everyone."

"Speaking of change, does the Church teach it's possible for Steve and Eli to change?"

"Yes. Remember we are all children of a perfect Father in Heaven. As such, we can become like Him, but because of sin, we all must repent and change. The Atonement of Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to repent and overcome all our worldly feelings and desires.

"Change is not only possible but necessary for every one of us. Sometimes the changes we experience in this life may not be as complete as we would like. A man at the conference used an interesting example." Ray pointed at his sister, "You served a mission to Mexico."

"Yes."

"Before your mission did you study or speak Spanish?"

"No."

"So, Jessica, for the first 21 years of your life you spoke English, not Spanish?"

"That's right."

"Did you learn to speak Spanish well?"

"Yea," Jessica replied with a hint of pride. "After a short time I quit speaking English. I spoke Spanish like a native. Eventually, I started to think and dream in Spanish."

"Amazing! I was never that good in Japanese," Ray mused. "You spoke Spanish well enough that you could get along without using English?"

"That's right."

"Does that mean you forgot how to speak English?"

"No," Jessica shook her head, "English was always there."

Ray leaned forward in his chair. "A man at the presentation used that language example when he talked about his transition out of the homosexual lifestyle. He said he was still attracted to other men, that he had to watch his thoughts, but he managed perfectly well speaking another language. The attractions and feelings he'd experienced before had diminished and he was moving forward on a different track. His social, emotional, and physical needs were being met in healthier ways than before."

"Interesting, so change may not be from black to white."

"That's exactly right. It's like your husband's attraction to pornography."

"That I understand," she nodded. "Tell me what they said at the conference about the scientific proof that men are born gay?"

Ray laughed, "Scientific proof?"

"What kind of a response is that?"

"I'm sorry," he continued to chuckle. "I'm cynical about so-called scientific proof. Science isn't black and white either. For example, when you were in high school, what were you taught about the origins of the universe?"

"That's easy—the universe began with a big bang billions of years ago."

"That's what I was taught," Ray agreed. "Is the universe static in size or expanding?"

"It's expanding."

"Is the rate of expansion decreasing or accelerating?"

"It's decreasing because of gravity," Jessica confidently replied. "Eventually the universe will collapse back into itself."

"Wrong."

Jessica glared at her older brother. She'd never felt comfortable with him telling her that she was wrong. "You're crazy. High school wasn't that long ago; I know what I was taught."

"True, high school wasn't that long ago for either of us. But scientific truths we were taught back then have changed. In 1997, astronomers discovered that the universe is expanding at an accelerating rate. A mysterious energy is pushing the universe apart."

"I've never heard of that."

"Well, that's what science says is the truth . . . today, at least. This mysterious force that they call 'dark energy' is counteracting the gravitational pull you and I learned about a few years ago."

"So, what's dark energy?" Jessica challenged.

"No one knows for sure," Ray shrugged. "Scientists estimate, though, that dark energy makes up roughly seventy-five percent of all the mass and energy in the universe."

"That's a surprise."

"To you and me maybe, and to scientists, but it's no surprise to God. Hold on, I have something in my study I need to share with you." Ray returned quickly with a magazine and continued, "The Church has always taught that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that children deserve to be raised in a family with both parents. Listen to this quote from a national publication: 'The stable family of two biological parents—surprise, surprise!—turns out to be the ideal vessel for molding character, for nurturing values, and for planning for a child's future.' As I said before, the world is beginning to understand something that God has known all along."

"So why doesn't God just open up and tell us everything He knows?" Jessica inquired.

"If God did that, there'd be no need for faith. For example, in 1833, with little explanation, God told the Prophet Joseph Smith that man shouldn't use tobacco. Church members obeyed that commandment based on faith. Then 50 or 60 years ago, scientists finally discovered how toxic tobacco is. At the same time other scientists cheated in their research to prove that tobacco wasn't harmful."

"That's strong language," Jessica replied. "Are you sure they cheated?"

"We know they manipulated their data to get the results they wanted," Ray responded. "One reason why tobacco companies have paid out billons of dollars to victims is because of falsified research."

"Okay, what's your point?" demanded Jessica.

Holding up a finger, Ray said, "My first point is that science doesn't understand many things, including what causes same-sex attraction. God hasn't shared all that He knows about the development of sexual orientation. But, through the prophet, He's given us direction regarding the issue. Someday science may learn more. Then men will realize that the world's teachings are false and that the prophet's teachings are true.

"My second point is that much of the research on the development of human sexual orientation has been corrupted by researcher bias and personal agendas. Some researchers have admitted that they did their research with the expressed goal to prove that the cause of homosexuality was genetic. Their research results are as dishonest and false as the research that showed tobacco was harmless."

"But," Jessica objected, "bad research exists on both sides of the issue."

"I agree with you. That's why I think the best answer as to what causes homosexuality is the one President Gordon B. Hinckley gave when he was asked that very question."

"Okay then," Jessica leaned forward with anticipation, "what did he say caused homosexuality?"

Ray opened his mouth, paused, and then announced in a theatrical fashion, "The prophet said that he didn't know what caused homosexuality."

"What kind of an answer is that?" Jessica asked in disbelief.

"That's an honest answer," Ray replied with a smile. "And today anyone who is honest will admit that no one knows what causes homosexuality. Even those who are pro-gay no longer feel that the sole cause of homosexuality is genetic. For example, in 1988, two men wrote a book outlining their plan to sell 'gay rights' to America. In the book they argued that 'for all practical purposes, gays should be considered to have been born gay, even though sexual orientation, for most humans, seems to be the product of complex interaction between innate predispositions and environmental factors during childhood and early adolescence.' A prominent psychologist, promoting the same agenda, recently suggested that the best way for gays and lesbians to gain their rights is to continue propagating the idea that they are born that way, even though it's not true.

"Most people are more honest. In an article covering research on gay rams, the author, a self-identified gay man, expressed a desire to better understand how biology and environment work together in shaping sexuality. Even the American Psychological Association has changed from promoting a biological cause for homosexuality to admitting that there is no agreement among scientist regarding the cause of homosexuality."

"Okay then, what does the Church teach?" she asked.

"As I mentioned, the Church teaches that we don't know or understand all the factors that influence a person's sexual orientation. But in the Church the cause of same-sex attraction is not as important as understanding that behavior can be controlled. The Atonement of Jesus Christ makes that possible."

Jessica objected, "But Steve doesn't believe that a person can control his homosexual behavior."

"I know," Ray nodded. "He also feels that homosexuals have been scattered among all societies since the dawn of time. If that's

the case, what about people experiencing same-sex attraction who lived in the city of Enoch or among the Nephites immediately after Christ's visit?"

"Beats me," Jessica shrugged.

"I don't know for sure either," Ray said as he flipped through his scriptures. "But in the book of Moses we read that 'the Lord came and dwelt with his people, and they dwelt in righteousness. And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.'"

He looked at Jessica, "They weren't perfect people, but the fact that the Lord dwelt with them indicates they must have been pretty righteous. They were of one heart, or united in feelings of compassion and empathy. They were of one mind, united in their thoughts and goals. The scriptures say there were no poor among them. Many people have interpreted this as relating to physical welfare only, but the phrase could also mean there were no emotional, social, or spiritual poor among them. If that's the case, no one was hungry, no one was lonely or depressed, and no one was weak in testimony.

"Each person would have received physical, social, emotional, and spiritual nurturing and would have extended comparable nurturing to others. Those with feelings of same-sex attraction would have been fully integrated into the society and would have had their needs met in righteous ways. They would have lived the same standards of morality as other members of the society. They would have participated in the building of Zion. And they would have eventually been taken into heaven with the other inhabitants of the city."

"That's interesting," mused Jessica. "You're saying that in Zion, either no one experienced same-sex attraction, or that those who did kept the standards and lived the same chaste lives as everyone else."

"That's correct," replied Ray. "Another example would be those living among the Nephites during the 200 years following

Jesus Christ's visit, who experienced same-sex attraction. Listen to this; 'And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of –ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God.'

"Now the word 'whoredom' refers to sexual immorality; behavior such as adultery, fornication, lewdness, or any other form of unchastity. So, if there were no whoredoms among the people, no one was engaged in those behaviors. Everyone had their hearts filled with the love of God, even those who experienced same-sex attractions. According to the scriptures, they were all heirs to the kingdom of God and among the happiest people ever created by God. All the people lived a high standard of sexual morality. I think they lived the same moral standard that God has commanded us to live today."

Jessica let out a long breath, "If that's true, then those who felt same-sex attractions did control their behavior. But, Ray, do you really think men and women who experienced those attractions lived with the people of Enoch and among the Nephites?"

"I don't know why not."

"Do you think they really felt worthy to dwell with Christ?"

"They must have felt worthy," Ray insisted. "If not, they would have voluntarily separated themselves from the righteous, like Steve and Eli have separated themselves from the Church today."

Jessica sighed, "When Mother and I visited you and Roberta, just after Eli came out, I was confident that Mother's point of view was correct. Now I'm not so sure."

"Speaking of Mother," Ray exhaled, "she's invited me to dinner next week. Honestly, I'm not looking forward to the visit. We'll spend most the evening arguing about Steve and Eli."

"Maybe not. Honestly, I was worried about coming over tonight," Jessica confessed. "But I've enjoyed our time together. You've changed. Maybe always remembering Jesus Christ does make a difference." Before Ray could respond, his sister's eyes brightened, "I know—when you get there give Mom a big hug. That'll soften her up."

"That's a good suggestion," Ray chuckled. "I'm glad you've had a pleasant time tonight. As for your feelings about same-sex attraction, you'll have to study it out in your own mind and make a decision. Whatever you decide, I want you to know that I love you. You'll always be my favorite sister."

"Your only sister," Jessica laughed.

"Whatever. Anyway, you came over to talk about holding a family reunion. I love the idea. I wonder what can we do to bring the family together so we can get to know each other better?"

"Ray," Jessica corrected him, "the real question is what can we do to bring the family together without starting a civil war?"

"That's true, Sis. Here's an idea, let's use water balloons. That way, when the shooting starts, everyone will get wet, but no one will get hurt."

"I love the idea," she exclaimed, "and we could . . . ."

CHAPTER 20

"That was a delicious meal, Mother." Ray folded his napkin and laid it neatly by the side of his empty plate. "Sitting here brings back good memories. I remember coming home after church on a beautiful day like today and talking for hours around this table."

"Those are good memories," his mother replied wistfully.

"Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome. Glad you enjoyed it."

"I'll help you clean up," Ray volunteered as he carried the casserole to the counter.

"Thank you. When you children were young, there was always a mess to clean up and no one willing to help—although I think you helped more than your brother did."

"That's true, Mommy."

His mother turned and beamed at him, "Ray, that's so sweet. You haven't called me 'Mommy' for 40 years."

"I hadn't thought about it for years, until your comment about cleaning up. Let me load the dishwasher."

"It's broken; we'll have to wash them in the sink."

Ray took off his watch, "Then I get to wash. You know, Mom, among our children, some are quicker to help than others."

"Who?"

"Lisa's always a good helper. Eli helps most the time."

"That doesn't surprise me," she replied casually, then scowled, "I've heard through the grapevine that you've decided to reject Eli and follow the Church."

Ray glared at his mother, surprised she hadn't brought the subject up earlier. "Mother, it's been wonderful to eat a meal without arguing about Eli and Steve. But, to answer your question, I'm not rejecting Eli. He's my son, and I love him."

"But Ray, it's not possible to love Eli and stay true to a church that doesn't accept him."

"Mother, I don't believe that. You know that Roberta and I love Eli. We haven't rejected him. We've encouraged his brothers and sisters to love him. He knows we'd do anything in our power to help him."

"What you say is true, but—"

"But," Ray angrily cut in, "you and everyone else can't stop telling me how I should love him."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the gay rights organizations have defined the rules of our relationship. They demand that I love Eli unconditionally and that I join their gay rights army. If I don't enlist and obey their orders exactly, then I'm bigoted, hateful, intolerant, and closed minded. Mother, 'Unconditional Love' is their battle cry, but the unconditional love they show is often self-serving and manipulative."

His mother motioned for him to calm down, "I think you're overreacting."

"Maybe, maybe not. We should both be able to choose how we respond to our child, but I feel I'm losing the right to choose." Ray looked at his mother with a frosty stare, "Do you know that Steve called me when the same-sex marriage issue was on the ballot?"

His mother's lips twisted into a knowing smile, "Tell me."

Ray clenched his fists, fought to control his anger. Thinking of Jesus Christ, he took a deep breath and continued in a low, even tone, "He said that if I voted against his right to marry his partner he would never speak to me again. He was defining how I should show my love for him. He did that to me even though I called him every day during his bout with depression. I spent

hundreds of hours on the phone with him, I even helped pay for his counseling. I didn't have to do any of that, but he's my brother and I love him."

"You're right," his mother agreed, the smile gone from her face. "Ray, I do have a question for you."

"Ask away."

"I've always wondered—how did you vote?"

Ray laughed, "Mommy, I can't believe you." He returned to washing the dishes.

"You didn't answer my question."

Without looking up, he replied softly, "At that time I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure if faith in Jesus Christ or unconditional love was most important. I knew I loved Eli and Steve, but I also loved Jesus Christ. For weeks, I agonized over the choice. After the election, I told Steve that no one would ever know my final decision. I also told him that if he chose never to speak to me again that was his decision, but I'd always love him." Ray glanced up, "Mommy, you know my faith. You know how I voted."

Nodding, his mother replied, "You're right, I do know. You must understand that Steve's only fighting for his rights."

"I do understand, and that's his privilege. But I have the same privilege to stand up for what *I feel* is right, although some are trying to take that privilege away from me. The world applauds Steve for pressuring me to vote a certain way. The whole situation reminds me of my great-great-great-grandma Elisa. When I was young, she became one of my favorite people because of the bedtime stories you told us."

"She was a wonderful lady, with great faith and courage. Ray, did you know she was only 15 years old when she joined the Church?"

"Yes, I know. That's when her father told her that if she was baptized she would no longer be his daughter."

"That's right. When she left on that cold December morning to be baptized, she kissed and hugged her mother and sisters for the last time."

"Mommy, why did her father force her to make that choice?"

"He loved her and thought she was making a big mistake."

Looking intently at his mother Ray asked, "Did he love her, or did he want to control her and force her to believe what he believed?"

She didn't answer.

Ray spoke slowly, almost reverently, "Over the years, we've all admired Elisa's faith and courage in joining the Church—in choosing the gospel over her family. You realize that her father created an artificial situation when he forced her to make that choice?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing in the gospel forced her to leave her family. After baptism, she could've continued to live with them. She would have been an even better family member because of the gospel teachings. Her father forced her to make a choice that didn't need to be made. Today, I feel people are creating the same kind of artificial situation in my life. They say I can't follow the prophet and love my son, that I must choose one or the other."

"Ray, if the Church was more inclusive you wouldn't have to make that choice."

Ray stared at his mother in amazement, "Mom, either the Church is Christ's church and He sets the standards of behavior, or it's the church of men and men set the standards."

She returned his gaze, "Other churches have adjusted to the changing world and are now more inclusive. Everyone feels welcome. I've heard Eli and Steve both say they don't feel comfortable at church."

"One, two, three," Ray counted, "four, five . . ."

"Are you counting because I've upset you?"

"No, I'm trying to control the urge to spray you with water, and I'm failing," he admitted as he gave her a quick squirt with the rinse nozzle.

"Oh!" his mother shreaked. "You haven't done that for years. Now I get to squirt you."

"No way," Ray hollered as he dashed into the living room. "Come out here so we can finish our conversation."

"First, you come out here so I can squirt you."

"Like I said, no way."

Finally realizing he wasn't coming back, she entered the living room, dabbing her blouse dry with a towel.

"You've said a lot to upset me," Ray admitted. "They're the same comments I've been putting up with for months. I don't know how Eli can say that he's not welcomed at Church. People always talk to him when he attends. His old youth leaders are genuinely happy to see him. Mother, many of them know about his situation, but that doesn't stop them from loving him."

"That may be," she replied, "but I know what I've heard."

"I don't doubt that at all." Ray took another deep breath. He didn't understand why his mother was pushing so hard, but he knew that in the past they'd both be shouting by now. He silently pleaded for patience, then continued. "When I was a bishop, I worked with several people who smoked. They insisted they felt uncomfortable attending church. I'd ask them to tell me what people had said or done to make them uncomfortable. They never could identify a specific comment or action. During that same time, a young woman confessed to me that she'd been sleeping with her boyfriend. No one in the ward, not even her parents, was aware. Yet she also felt uncomfortable at church. I think it's a person's conscience, not ward members, that makes a person feel uncomfortable."

"Maybe Eli and Steve feel uncomfortable because the Church is always telling them they have to change," his mother replied. "Your brother says it's impossible to change."

"That may be true," Ray thoughtfully agreed with his mother. "Change may not be the right word to describe what the Church teaches."

"Steve has studies that show those who try to change become suicidal and depressed. The harder they try to change the worse they feel."

"I've personally spoken with men who have left that lifestyle and now live happy and very satisfied lives with their wife and children. They are clearly neither suicidal nor depressed. Besides, I've also read that even those who embrace their 'gayness' and the 'gay lifestyle' experience high instances of suicide and depression," Ray retorted, growing more upset.

"That's because people like you don't accept them for who they really are. You're always harping about change. It's always, 'I love you, but . . . ,' or 'God will bless you if . . .'"

"Hold on," Ray cautioned. "I've never told my brother to change!"

"He knows where you stand though!" she insisted forcefully. "Every time you look his way, he feels you're judging him! Can't you get off his back?"

"I'm not on his back!" Ray shouted. He shook his head, took several deep breaths, and quickly apologized, "Mommy, I'm sorry . . . I don't know what came over me. I know it's not right to raise my voice at you, especially when I love you so much."

She slowly looked up, smiled faintly, "I love you, too. I'm sorry I said what I did."

Ray forced a laugh, "I just realized that I'm getting what I deserve. When I was younger, I knew exactly what to say to upset you. Now you know what to say about same-sex attraction to push my buttons. What goes around comes around."

"When you say 'same-sex attraction,'" his mother replied, "you push one of my buttons. That term doesn't begin to cover what Steve and Eli feel."

"I'm sorry Mother. I don't mean to upset you. When I use the word 'gay,' I feel I've bought into the whole 'gay rights' agenda."

"That's what they call themselves; that is what they want others to call them."

"Mommy, you never allowed your children to label each other. You taught us that when we labeled a person, he or she would begin to act according to the label. Eli told me he struggled for years with feelings of attraction to men, but he never acted on the feelings. Then on a trip back East, he shared his feelings with a friend who labeled him 'gay.' Suddenly Eli started acting differently. Just imagine if Eli and Steve each labeled himself a son of God, a son with the potential to become just like his Father? Like everyone else on earth, they're not perfect; they have a challenge or two. But calling their feelings an attraction separates who they are from what they feel."

Ray continued, surprised his mother hadn't cut in. "Satan wants men to believe that they have no choice, that repentance is impossible. But if it's impossible to change or control behavior, then the Atonement of Jesus Christ is a lie. Mother, I know that Christ suffered so all men can repent and come unto Him. Change and repentance is possible. The scriptures say that God won't give a commandment unto men without providing a way for them to keep the commandment. Each person must choose what he'll do. I believe the whole idea that a 'gay' sexual orientation is innate and immutable is wrong. If there's no choice, Satan's won. But it's a mistake for us to believe that Steve and Eli have no choice."

"If choice and change is possible, why hasn't Steve been able to go straight?"

"Why should he change when you're such a support and advocate for his lifestyle?"

"Okay then," she smirked, "why hasn't Eli changed? You certainly don't support his lifestyle."

"You're right about that," Ray smiled. "I learned the hard way that Eli has his agency. I can't change him regardless of how much I want him to. If I could change him against his will, then Satan wins again, because I will have removed his agency. All I can do is love him."

"You can do more than just love him. You can fight for his rights. Especially in the Church, where you have been a leader

and are respected, you can speak up for fair and equal treatment for your son."

Ray nodded wearily, "Don't you see? I'm fighting for his rights also. I'm fighting for his right to accept Jesus Christ and the cleansing power of His Atonement, but many in the world don't see it that way. They agree with you, Mother. When you say that you know that Steve was born gay, they applaud you for loving your son and for bravely speaking out in his defense. They praise you for standing up to the wicked Church that denies your son his rights. But when I say that I choose to follow a prophet, the world accuses me of blindly following without thinking. According to the world you're open-minded, and I'm close-minded; you're tolerant, and I'm intolerant; you're loving and accepting, and I'm hateful and judgmental. Mommy . . . these labels hurt deeply. I've never viewed myself as intolerant or hateful." Ray stopped, out of breath and teary eyed.

His mother threw him her towel, "You're as sensitive as your brother and sister. I know that you're not hateful and judgmental. But as for blindly following the prophet," she grinned, "you never do seem to think about what he says."

"And is that wrong, Mother? Isn't my decision to love my son and obey the prophet as valid as your decision to love Steve and reject the prophet?"

"When you put it that way, I guess it is."

Ray continued, "Besides, I don't think I'm acting blindly when I choose to obey the prophet's words. When I was a child, you taught me to obey the Word of Wisdom. I believed that you loved me and that everything you said was true. Because of your teachings, when I was eight or nine years old, I made a decision never to drink alcohol. Over the years, when offered an alcoholic drink, I've automatically said no. There's no need to make a new decision each time.

"In the same way, years ago I decided to follow the voice of the prophet. I believed that God loved me and that He would never allow His prophet to lead me astray. I still believe that.

There's no need to question the prophet every time he speaks. I consistently choose to immediately follow the prophet's teachings and later through the Spirit receive a confirmation that his words are true. You, on the other hand, consistently choose to disregard the prophet and the witness of the Spirit. Certain people applaud you for your choice and criticize me for mine." Ray looked tenderly at his mother, "But I believe that our choices are equally valid."

She returned his gaze, "I agree with what you're saying, although I don't agree with the choices you've made. If the Church would follow the lead of other churches and accept our sons for who they really are, things would be better."

"Mother, those other churches are being torn apart because they've strayed from their moral foundation in regards to this issue." Ray's frustration increased; his neck throbbed. More than anything, he wanted to leave, but not with the negative feelings that filled his heart. Again he pleaded for God's help, then leaning forward, he spoke softly but firmly, "Churches are of little value when they change their moral teachings to meet the world's expectations. God defines moral standards, and His standards don't change. Three thousand years ago, God declared to Moses that man shouldn't commit adultery or kill. In this dispensation, God told Joseph Smith, 'Thou shalt not . . . commit adultery, nor kill, nor do anything like unto it.' From the beginning, prophets have taught that only sexual relations between a lawfully married man and woman are acceptable." Continuing to lean forward, he looked intently at his mother, "What's the world's standard for sexual relations today?"

"Well," she stammered, "I guess the standard is that two consenting adults can decide what's okay."

"In other words, mother, anything goes—far different from what God commanded Moses. The world's not a better place because of the 'anything goes' sexual morality taught by man."

His mother cut in, "People can decide as well as God what's acceptable."

"Mother," Ray replied persuasively, "two people can choose to do anything they want, but that doesn't make it right. Only God can define appropriate sexual relations. God's also said we shouldn't kill, but thousands of unborn babies are killed every day.

"Ray, that's harsh; the law allows a woman to choose what happens to her body."

"She could also choose to stay morally clean," Ray countered, "but that's another subject. People throughout the world have rationalized that it's okay to kill innocent unborn babies. However, God's prophets have always taught the same standard of behavior. True happiness will come only by obedience to God's commandments. Mother, I honestly want Eli to be happy. I pray that Eli's heart will be softened, and that he'll desire to do what brings eternal happiness."

"Eli's an adult; he knows what'll make him happy. Let him decide."

Ray chuckled, "Eli's like the rest of us, too short-sighted to see beyond the moment. Mother, when you remarried immediately after Dad passed away, you thought you'd be happy. Were you?"

His mother grimaced at the memory, "I moved too quickly. I married a loser, a big mistake."

"God could've helped you if you'd asked Him. Back to Eli and his search for happiness. Some people think drugs will make them happy. Mother, for a moment imagine that Eli thinks taking drugs, such as cocaine, will make him happy. One day he comes to you and says, 'Grandma, do you love me?' You answer, 'Of course, I love you.' He asks, 'Do you want me to be happy?' You reply, 'Yes, I want you to be happy!' He demands, 'Grandma, give me money to buy drugs.'" Ray smiled at his mother, "How would you respond to your grandson?"

"I know where this is going."

Ray continued to press, "Do you believe that cocaine will bring him happiness?"

"No, I don't," she reluctantly admitted.

"Do you believe that a committed relationship or legalized same-sex marriage will bring either Eli or Steve a guarantee of eternal happiness?"

"Forget about eternal happiness," she growled, "what about happiness right now?"

"Mother, you're the one who taught your children to put off immediate pleasure for long-term happiness. After my mission, you encouraged me to buy a beat-up, used car so I'd have enough money to finish college. You encouraged me to stay morally clean so that Roberta and I could be sealed in the temple. Now you're implying that if I want to have an affair with a consenting adult, you'd be okay with that, regardless of what Roberta, our children, or even God might think. Mother, what's changed?"

"I learned that what I'd always believed wasn't true."

"The gospel hasn't changed, Mother, you have," Ray said compassionately.

"Maybe . . . I have. Let's finish the dishes."

As they cleaned the kitchen, Ray mentioned an upcoming appointment he didn't want to keep. His mother encouraged him to face his fears. "You're right, Mother," he finally agreed, "it's something I've got to do." And, a few minutes later, as his mother soaked him with water, she insisted it was something she had to do.

After drying off, Ray gave his mother the customary kiss on the cheek. Then, finding the courage he'd lacked earlier in the evening, he wrapped both arms around her in a loving bear hug. Instinctively she jerked back, then melted in his embrace. "Mother, we may disagree, but I love you. I'll always love you," he whispered through his tears.

She threw both arms around her oldest son and responded softly, "And I love you. Oh, how I love you."

CHAPTER 21

Ray fidgeted in his chair, feeling overwhelmed as he sat in Mitt's study. The room looked as if it had been plucked out of an elite interior design magazine. Everything reinforced the perception that the man sitting on the other side of the desk was successful. Mitt, as always, had warmly welcomed Ray into his home, adding to Ray's uneasiness.

"Ray, you look stressed. Eat this," Mitt tossed him a candy bar. "Chocolate solves all kinds of problems. Now, tell me what brings you here."

"I won't be attending group any more."

"Sorry to hear that. Our views are so similar; I often thought we were twins. What's changed?"

"I learned that you're wrong."

Mitt, always in control, didn't raise an eyebrow. "Please, tell me how I'm wrong?"

"Your basic focus is wrong."

Mitt leaned forward, "How can love be wrong?"

"Love's not wrong, but there *are* other principles of the gospel."

"I know that."

"But," Ray stammered, "other principles of the gospel are never mentioned at group. You preach unconditional love so loudly that everything else is drowned out. Last month someone said it's okay to have intimate homosexual relations during this life because God will make everything right after death. Everyone clapped. The only message offered at group is to love our children and let them do whatever they want."

"Is that a problem? Won't God make up for our shortcomings in the next life?"

"So you're saying eat, drink, and be merry now, and if we're guilty of sin God may beat us with a few stripes and then we'll be saved in His kingdom?"

"No one's perfect," Mitt nonchalantly replied. "Even though our sons can't marry, they still need to love and be loved. They have that right."

"But obedience to the law of chastity isn't optional."

"They can't obey the law of chastity because the Church won't allow them to marry. Not everyone can obey every commandment right now."

"But a person should try to obey," Ray insisted. He took a deep breath, "I'll try to explain. Imagine that your neighbor has a terrible temper. Where he got it from—a gene, his father, the Army—doesn't matter. God has commanded your neighbor to bridle his passions. He can choose to be obedient and try to control his temper or he can let it control him. We'll assume it's hard for him to manage his temper, so he quits trying and allows his temper to control him. What happens when he dies?"

"He goes to the spirit world."

"With or without his temper?" Ray inquired.

"With his temper."

"That's right; it's a basic part of him. But if he's to become perfect, he still needs to bridle his temper. If he allows his temper to dictate his actions in this life, how hard will it be to control it in the next life?"

Mitt shrugged, "I imagine the longer he allows his temper to control him, the harder it will be to change."

"Agreed. On the other hand, if your neighbor tries to bridle his temper now, even if he's not always successful, this life will be easier. And when he dies, his spirit will already be master over one of his passions." Ray opened the scriptures he'd brought and continued, "Alma taught, 'that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same

spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.' Your neighbor's spirit of obedience and his efforts to control his passions will be a big part of who he is in the next life. Now consider a man who is attracted to other men. If he does his best to control his attractions and obey God's commandments, what will his life be like?"

"Lonely and unloved," Mitt spit the words out.

Ray slowly exhaled, "Mitt, no one needs to be lonely and unloved. We both know single people of all ages whose lives are full of love and accomplishment. People need to focus on the things they can do. And in the next life, an obedient person will have every blessing God has promised to his righteous children."

Mitt furiously slapped the desk, "But it's not fair. Why won't the Church allow Tony to live with another man in a committed, married relationship?"

"Many things in this life aren't fair," Ray responded, taken back by Mitt's outburst. "Many people will never have a chance to marry in this life, for whatever reason. But every righteous person will have the opportunity some day. Don't you know people, other than Tony, who won't marry in this life?"

"Yes," Mitt said dispassionately. He was again in control.

Leaning forward, Ray continued, "When we go to the temple now, we're sealed vicariously for deceased men and women who were married in this life. Someday, we'll be sealed vicariously for righteous men and women who've courted each other in the spirit world and desire to marry. They'll become an eternal family and be worthy to receive every blessing promised to a man and woman sealed in the temple during this life. In the spirit world our sons will have their opportunity to marry, if they desire."

Mitt shook his head in disagreement, "I understand what you're saying, but if our sons aren't attracted to women now, what will change in the spirit world?"

Ray momentarily paused before replying, "While we don't understand everything that happens between death and the final judgment, we do know that our sons won't experience same-sex

attraction in the next life. We know that Christ's Atonement is infinite and eternal. Because of the Atonement, repentance and change is possible in this life and the next. We know that the gospel will be preached to those in the spirit world, even to those who have sinned and not followed the prophets." He flipped through his scriptures, "Listen to this, 'Thus was the gospel preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets.

"'These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the holy Ghost by the laying on of hands,

"'And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.'

"In this life and the next, change must be possible or the Atonement and teaching the gospel in the spirit world is wasted effort. Mitt, I believe that through the Atonement, Tony and Eli's very nature can change. Remember, they were both among the noble and great ones sent to the earth in the latter days. In the pre-earth life, they earned the right to be ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood. Listen to what Alma taught: 'And this is the manner after which [Tony and Eli] were ordained—being called and prepared from the foundation of the world [in the pre-earth life] according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place [the pre-earth life] being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling. . . . And thus [Tony and Eli] have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith.'" Ray closed his scriptures. "Our sons made righteous choices before they came to earth."

Mitt nodded, "I agree. They did make good choices. That makes the Church's policy even more unfair."

"The Church's teachings are based on 6,000 years of God's words recorded in the scriptures and on—"

"Don't give me that," Mitt objected. "The scriptures are ambiguous and don't take into account any of—"

"Mitt, the scriptures are not ambiguous. Listen to the Old Testament: 'Neither shalt thou lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.'" Ray paused, then added, "I've heard that the Hebrew word which has been translated in Leviticus as 'abomination' can also mean that a person has been lead astray or is straying. If a person has strayed or made a mistake, then that same man has the power to return to the right path or correct his mistake. I like that definition because it implies that change is possible."

As Mitt opened his mouth to comment, Ray hurried on. "'If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.' Paul taught, 'For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly.'"

"Okay, okay, they're not ambiguous," Mitt agreed, holding up both hands as if surrendering, "but that's not the important point. We can't assume that the prohibitions given thousands of years ago are binding forever. All scripture must be understood in relation to the culture and situation at the time it was given. Polygamy was approved by God and practiced throughout Old Testament times. But we don't practice polygamy today. Our culture and situation are different."

Ray shook his head, "I'm sorry I cut you off. You're right. Times have changed. But you cut me off before I could make my main point. The current doctrine of the Church is based on the scriptures *and* on the words of the living prophets. Therefore, faithful members of the Church follow the current prophet and don't practice polygamy, don't promote the gay lifestyle, and don't support same-sex marriage."

"So we all end up following a man who doesn't understand our children or homosexuality."

"That statement brings me to another concern," Ray continued quickly. "Members of your group are proud. You talk as if you know everything about homosexuality, and the Church knows nothing. You're constantly discussing ways to educate the Church."

"Only because the Church needs to be educated."

Ray chuckled, "Years ago, a prophet defined pride as enmity toward God. He said the proud want God to agree with them; they feel no need to change their opinions to agree with God. The prophet has consistently spoken against same-sex marriage. Yet you feel the Church was wrong to speak out against same-sex marriage initiatives and to encourage individuals to oppose them. You actively campaigned for the passage of a law that would allow your son to marry his same-sex partner, and you pray that the prophet will someday change his mind and agree with you. That sounds like pride to me."

"I don't think that's the case," Mitt scowled.

Ray shook his head, wondering how two people could see the same issue so differently. "You and others in the group act as if you're intellectually superior to everyone who doesn't agree with you. Several months ago, a speaker highlighted three quotes from Church leaders stating that marriage between one man and one woman is the norm and has been throughout history. That speaker then pointed out that over 70% of all societies today—he emphasized societies—are either polygamous or polyandrous. He said that the normal male and female relationship since the beginning of time has been polygamous, usually with no formal marriage contract."

Mitt nodded in agreement, "I remember that speaker. His point was significant. Even today in developed, western countries, households headed by one man and one woman who have been formally married are in the minority."

Ray shook his head in disbelief, "Mitt, you just illustrated what I'm trying to say. While the statement might be intellectually correct, it's spiritually damning because you're focusing on

the wrong point. It doesn't matter what the statistics show or what the world's norm is. When the prophets and apostles say that marriage between one man and one woman is ordained of God, members of the Church understand that's the pattern or ideal God wants us to strive for."

"But," Mitt objected, "over the years we've helped the Church better understand homosexuality."

"That may be the case," Ray acknowledged, "but to point out that Church leaders technically misused the word 'normal' appears to be flaunting your intelligence. It's as if only you understand things correctly. You want Church leaders to catch up to your understanding. That's pride, and your pride is clouding your judgment." Ray opened his scriptures again, "In 2 Nephi 9:21 we read that Christ 'cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice.' Mitt, what's the message of Christ's voice that we must hearken to in order to be saved?"

"Christ's message is to love as God loves. And that's what you've heard every time you've come to group."

"That's what I've heard all right, yet in verse 23 we read that Jesus Christ has commanded 'all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.' That scripture doesn't mention love, but does talk about a perfect faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is also the first principle of the gospel."

"But the scriptures say that God is love," Mitt protested. "And we're commanded to love others as we love ourselves."

"I agree that we're commanded to love everyone, but the commandment to love doesn't include enabling unrighteous sexual behavior or same-sex marriage."

Glaring at his visitor, Mitt declared, "Our sons have as much right to marry as anyone."

Ray returned his gaze, "Even when the living prophet and apostles have proclaimed that only marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God?"

"They're wrong!"

"I don't think so. Listen to verse 28 in the same chapter; 'O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.' Mitt, you feel that you're learned, that you know more than the prophets."

"But they're not speaking God's message of love and acceptance," he objected.

"Yet the scriptures say, 'And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation.'"

"Maybe the prophet isn't speaking as directed by the Holy Ghost."

Speaking in a steady tone, Ray continued, "Further illustration of what I've been saying: if the prophet isn't teaching what you feel is right, you claim he's wrong. Wouldn't the Lord replace the prophet if he was leading the Church astray on an issue this important?"

"The prophet still has a lot to learn about homosexuality."

"Mitt, I've made a decision to follow the prophet."

"Ray, you disappoint me; I thought you loved your son more than that."

"I'm more concerned about disappointing God than you."

"You'll disappoint your son also."

Looking intently at Mitt, Ray agreed, "I've already done that. With Christ's help I hope to rebuild our relationship."

"Don't forget that the prophet doesn't truly understand homosexuality."

"Mitt, don't *you* forget, the prophet isn't acting alone. We sustain 15 men as prophets, seers, and revelators. They're

thoughtful, intelligent men who counsel together and prayerfully consider every decision. All 15 men signed the family proclamation. They're called by God to teach His truths. The Spirit has witnessed to me that what they've taught regarding same-sex attraction is true.

"At the same time, Mitt, I haven't received a spiritual witness that what you're teaching is true, although when I started attending the group I believed everything you said. You and the group became my God. You answered my questions. You preached the gospel of love and tolerance. You accepted me without question; you didn't ask me to change. You presented an easy to understand goal of love and equal rights for our children. When I was with you, I felt everything would be okay. I had no worries, no hard choices to make."

Ray noticed Mitt smile as he continued, "All I needed to do was love Eli and fight for his rights. But after group meetings I'd go home and pray and immediately the good feelings would pass. Pain, confusion, and uncertainty would return. Ultimately, there was no lasting peace or comfort in your counsel."

Instantly Mitt's smile vanished, "That's because our children aren't equal citizens in society and in the Church. Until they are, we'll continue to feel the same pain and hurt they feel."

"Mitt, I don't agree. Christ said, 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.' Also, 'he who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his reward, even peace in this world.' Christ has promised you and me peace if we trust in Him and keep His commandments. I feel that peace now. Because of that peace, I'm more patient and loving with everyone. Mitt, I invite you to have faith in Jesus Christ and to allow His peace to enter your life."

Mitt pushed back his chair and slowly stood, "There'll be no peace in my heart until the Church accepts Tony as the person he really is. I won't quit fighting until that happens."

Ray slowly shook his head, "Mitt, has it ever occurred to you that your approach to this issue is wrong—very, very wrong?"

CHAPTER 22

Roberta slowly settled her tired body into the hot water next to her husband. They'd spent the morning hiking through beautiful mountain forests and meadows. Now they sat side by side in the relaxing, swirling water of the jetted spa, eyes shut, hands clasped, comfortable in their silence.

"Hi. May we join you?"

Ray opened his eyes, "Please do." Standing at the edge of the hot tub were two women, both in their 60s, with beautiful silver-gray hair. They looked like sisters except for their weight, one being at least a hundred pounds heavier than the other. They visited for several minutes about their families and homes, the weather, and the mountains. Soon the two women, obviously good friends, began talking about common interests and experiences. Roberta and Ray closed their eyes, vaguely aware of each other and the women's conversation.

Sandra, the heavier of the two, carried on about her children and grandchildren, proud of each one. She made special mention of her handicapped daughter, Emily. The other woman, Martha, bragged about her daughter and her perfect grandchildren she had recently visited in a neighboring state. Ray smiled. The conversation ebbed and flowed as Ray drifted in and out of consciousness. Roberta's head rested on his shoulder, life was good.

". . . but I don't understand the gays. They . . ."

What did I just hear? Ray, who was almost asleep, wondered.

He heard Martha speaking, "As much as I love being with my grandchildren, it's hard to visit them. There seems to be so many gay men in their city. I don't know . . ."

Oh, will it ever end? Ray wondered. Roberta had also heard the comments. Although her head still rested on his shoulder, Ray felt her tense up, her hand tightly gripping his. *What should I do?* He thought of the countless times he and Roberta had been unintentionally hurt by people's unkind comments. As Ray listened to Martha, he thought of Eli and became angry. Ray wanted to yell at her and tell her to shut up. Then he remembered Mitt, the man who constantly pushed the need to educate people about homosexuality. This woman needed to be educated.

Ray tried to speak, but couldn't. He'd never heard anyone talk so negatively about another group of people. His heart beat rapidly, his muscles tensed. "Pray for me, Sweetie," he whispered to Roberta as she lifted her head off his shoulder. Taking a deep breath and uttering his own short pray he tried again to speak. "Do you know any gay men?" he questioned in a high pitched, steady voice.

Martha stopped in mid-sentence, unsure what she'd heard, "What?"

"You've been attacking a group of people. Do you personally know a gay man?" Ray glared at her.

Lowering her gaze, she mumbled, "No, I don't think that I do."

Ray glanced at the other woman, "How about you? Do you personally know any gay men?"

"No, not that I'm aware of."

"Then how can you talk about them with so much disgust?" The pitch of his voice lowered, "Would you mind if we told you about our son?"

"Yes . . . I mean no, I wouldn't mind," Sandra said. Martha simply nodded her head.

"As I mentioned earlier, we're blessed with six healthy, active, children. They know that we love them and that God loves them. Are you Christian?"

Both nodded yes.

"Then you can understand how hard we worked to raise our children to be good people and good Christians. Growing up, they were involved in church, school, and community activities. They all had good friends. They all played the piano and at least one other musical instrument in their school band or orchestra. They earned recognitions for their service in school and in church. Two sons served two-year missions for our church, and a third son is now serving a mission in Russia."

"Then you must be LDS. So am I," confessed Martha.

"We are LDS," Ray cringed, wondering how a member of God's true church could say the negative, hurtful words he'd heard earlier.

He continued, "Each of our children had unique talents and characteristics. Our second son, Eli, was especially talented in music. Among our children, he was the best student with a 3.9 GPA. He was an obedient and caring son, always kind and helpful. As he grew up, he tried to be perfect. Eli was a gentleman to every young woman he dated. Of course, he wasn't perfect. Most of the time his room was messy and sometimes we had to push him to study. But I think that any parent would be proud to have a son like him. Two years ago Eli told us he was gay."

"I am so sorry," Martha said.

"Why?" asked Roberta.

"Why? It must be a horrible burden to have a son like that." Ray wanted to shake her, then remembered he'd felt the same way not so long ago.

"At first that's how we felt," Roberta responded compassionately. "But he's been a great blessing in our lives. Sandra, has it been a horrible burden to have a daughter with special needs in your family?"

A tear rolled down Sandra's cheek. Wiping it with her wet finger she replied, "At first my husband and I thought Emily was a curse. We wondered what we'd done wrong. But over the years we've realized she's one of our greatest joys. Every member of our family has been blessed by Emily's special spirit and love."

"That's how we feel about Eli. At first, we blamed ourselves. We wondered what we'd done wrong. We felt like failures. Before we learned about Eli's attractions, we had loved him and had been so proud of his accomplishments. We were always proud to introduce him to our friends. Learning that he experienced same-sex attraction didn't destroy all his talents or the good things we admired about him. In fact, after we got over the initial shock, we became even more aware of his strengths."

"What do you mean same-sex attraction?"

"We don't believe in labeling a person as gay or homosexual," Ray replied. "To label a person implies that he was born with attractions or behavior that he can't control. We believe that all God's children are born with moral agency. So we use 'gay' and 'homosexual' as adjectives to describe specific attractions, thoughts, and behaviors."

"Are you saying that men aren't born gay?" asked Sandra. "My church teaches that men are born gay. My minister says they can't change, and we need to love and accept them as they are."

Ray stifled a smile. Only a few minutes earlier she'd been agreeing with Martha about those horrible men. "We don't believe any person is born gay or lesbian. We love our son, but feel sad that in this life he may not enjoy all the blessings and experiences that his brothers and sisters can receive."

"I understand," Sandra smiled. "My husband and I feel the same way about Emily. We hope that some day, all that she's missing will be made up to her."

Ray responded, "I believe that someday Emily will be healed. While we don't have all the answers, we also feel that in some future time, our son will have opportunities that he doesn't have now."

Martha confessed, "When we started talking, I said that I didn't know any gay men. That's not true. I do know a neighbor with a gay son. I don't think they ever speak to him, and the younger children don't know about their brother. Do all of your

children know about their brother? Do they accept him? Are they afraid of him?"

"I feel sorry for that family," replied Roberta. "They're missing some wonderful experiences. All of Eli's brothers and sisters know about his attractions. I think they accept him, although some have struggled harder than others to work through their feelings. After we got Eli's permission, we held a family meeting. Everyone was there, including Eli. The meeting was different than we'd planned, but we were able to bring everything out into the open. As a result, I think each member of the family has been able to respond in a healthier manner.

"When Eli first started living with his partner, Jeff, we had some additional challenges. Some of Eli's married siblings wouldn't come to family activities when Eli and Jeff attended. I would cry before and after every activity because I knew that the entire family wouldn't be together. It took me a long time to realize that each married couple needed to do what they felt was right in regards to their own children. We encouraged all the adults to show love and respect to each other, even if they didn't feel comfortable taking their children to family gatherings. We love our son. We want to be part of his life and we want him to be part of the family, even though we don't always approve of the choices he's made."

Martha shook her head, "You let your son's partner into your home? I can't imagine being able to do such a thing."

"At first, we couldn't imagine such a thing either," Ray looked directly at Martha. "I know you won't believe this, but getting to know Jeff has been a positive experience for our family. Jeff has special talents that he has willingly shared. While we don't approve of the relationship he has with Eli, we love him as a son of God."

Roberta sat up on the edge of the hot tub, "I'll give you an idea as to how we get along as a family. Last Sunday we had a baby blessing. Sandra, a baby blessing is like a christening. Several of Eli's nieces and nephews sat on his lap throughout the worship service. After the meeting, we went to a daughter's home for

lunch. Eli held the new baby and visited with his brothers and sisters. We continue to love him and he seems to love us."

Ray added, "I was sad that Eli wasn't in the circle when the baby was blessed. We see how loving and kind Eli is. He would make a wonderful father, but we realize he may not have that opportunity in this life."

"I sense you do love your son," Martha observed. "Does that mean you support same-sex marriage?"

"No," Ray replied. "We believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman. We also feel that children deserve to be raised by both a mother and a father. I have a question: do either of you know any perfect people?"

Both women shook their heads no.

"Men who experience same-sex attractions aren't perfect either. Many of them have been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused. Most can never remember having a close male friend their own age. Many feel that their peers never accepted them, that they were never part of a 'group' or 'gang' of boys. Some remember rejection by a significant adult in their life such as their father or a leader. In some cases, they were the first boy to be teased and the last boy picked to be on a team. Many of these men have suffered deep emotional wounds and have unmet needs in their lives. Like us, they want to feel accepted and validated.

"We may find some of their behavior disturbing, but we must remember that they are real men with dreams and goals. They have struggles, challenges, and unanswered questions. Their needs are real and complex. They're children of God, and we believe He loves them. We believe He expects us to love them as He loves them."

"But how do I love a gay man without condoning his lifestyle?" Martha asked.

"Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan?"

"Yes."

"In that parable Christ told of a Jew who fell among thieves. The Jew was left wounded and half-dead by the side of the road.

Several people passed by who should have helped but didn't. Then a Samaritan came along. The Jews thought Samaritans were hypocritical, idol worshipping pagans. The Samaritans saw Jews as self-righteous, intolerant bigots. Though they were neighbors, Jews and Samaritans were not neighborly. Yet only the Samaritan had compassion on the Jew. He bound up his wounds and provided support for his complete recovery. The Samaritan didn't demand that the wounded Jew change his life before he provided assistance. He saw a man in need and helped him.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that you change your position on what you feel are moral issues, or go counter to what you feel is right. I am suggesting that you change how you view those who feel same-sex attraction. They may think and act different than you do, but they're real people with real feelings and challenges. We all need to reach out to them with love."

"And please remember," Roberta added, "even if a person who experiences same-sex attraction doesn't hear the put-downs and unpleasant comments, the mother of that person may hear them. The hardest thing for me since our son told us about his attractions has been to hear the hateful and unkind comments from people who don't understand. I stopped going to an exercise group because of thoughtless comments by several of the women. As much as I needed the exercise, it wasn't fun to go home and cry all day. On another occasion, while chaperoning a high school activity, several students began telling jokes about homosexuals. Each joke felt like a knife twisting in my heart. Finally, I asked them to stop and told them why. They were sorry they'd hurt me, but the pain lingered with me for days.

"Please remember that every man who is attracted to other men has a mother who loves him. We also believe that Jesus Christ loves every man and woman who experiences these attractions. If He loves them, we must love them."

They sat silently, watching three teenaged boys approach the hot tub. "Mind if we join you?"

"Please do. We have room for everyone."

A short time later, as Martha and Sandra prepared to leave, they sincerely thanked Ray and Roberta for their comments. Martha specifically promised never again to utter an unkind or hateful remark about "those people."

Watching them walk off, Ray thanked God for the courage to speak up. Leaning close to Roberta he whispered, "We don't have to always be quiet or turn the other cheek. We can help others understand same-sex attraction from a gospel perceptive one person at a time."

Roberta smiled, closed her eyes, and started to fall asleep.

"Sweetie," Ray said quietly, as if he didn't want to wake her.

Roberta, slowly opening her eyes, lifted her head off Ray's shoulder. "Why do you insist on waking me whenever I begin to fall asleep?"

"I don't wake you whenever you fall asleep," Ray objected.

"You do wake me more often than you realize."

"I'm sorry, I'll be quiet. Please go back to sleep."

"I can't go back to sleep now, I'm awake."

"I really am sorry. I won't ever do it again."

Roberta rolled her eyes, "Did you have something to say to me? You did wake me for a reason, didn't you?"

"I did, but I feel bad about waking you. Please go back to sleep and I'll tell you when you wake up."

"Look, I'm awake now. Tell me!"

"Okay," Ray said quietly so the teenagers wouldn't hear. "Two years ago today, we read Eli's letter about his feelings of same-sex attraction."

"I'd forgotten all about that," Roberta responded softly. "He didn't say same-sex attraction, though. He said he was gay. He still feels that way. I wish he would change how he sees himself."

Ray agreed and added, "One thing that has changed is that he knows we love him in spite of his attractions. I hope he knows that we'll always love him."

"So do I," agreed Roberta. "Every day I pray all our children will know that we love them. While Eli hasn't changed, you and

I've changed a lot over the past two years. I remember my feelings on the cruise . . ." After reminiscing together and wishing each other a happy anniversary, Ray closed his eyes and began to drift asleep.

". . . That's sooo gay . . ."

What did I just hear? Ray wondered, fighting to wake up. *Who's talking?*

". . . I can't believe you're sooo gay . . ."

The teenage boys, Ray realized. *Here we go again*. He started to utter a silent prayer when he heard Roberta's voice, "Hey you guys, do you know anyone who's gay?"

Ray relaxed, smiled, and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 23

Breathing deeply through his nose, Ray smiled. The scent of pine trees added to the peace and quiet surrounding him. The ground was still moist from the previous night's rain. Except for the young man in front of him, all he saw was trees.

Does it get any better than this? he wondered.

The voice in front of him interrupted his thoughts. "I'm feeling better, Brother Neels. I'm going to try to catch up with the others."

"Watch the trail," Ray shouted at the quickly disappearing figure. He wondered how the young man could be sick one minute and have so much energy the next. Ray picked up his own pace until he caught up to the next person on the trail.

"How ya doing, David?" Ray asked.

"I'm going to make it . . . I think," David replied without turning around. "I wish I had the energy our sons have."

"I wish the same thing. Did you ever go hiking with Dan when he was younger?"

"No, I'm sorry to say that I didn't do as many things with Daniel as I should have—too much work back then. By the way, how far have we hiked?"

Ray thought for a minute, "We did about 8 miles yesterday and 2 or 3 miles this morning; 10 or 11 miles total. We only have 40 more miles to go."

"Sure seems longer than 10 miles. Does it get easier?"

"By day three or four your body becomes accustomed to the pack and the walking, and you do begin to feel better."

David turned, an exaggerated look of pain on his face, "By day three or four I'll be dead. But at least I'll feel better. Right now I hurt everywhere."

"You're doing fine. You'll make it in good shape."

David stepped off the trail, "I'm pretty slow. Why don't you go ahead?"

"Keep walking," Ray replied. "Go at a comfortable pace and I'll keep you company. Talking will help keep your mind off your aches and pains." Actually, there was more to Ray's offer to walk with David than just keeping him company. Ray's assignment was to bring up the rear, to make sure that no one fell too far behind.

"How many times have you been on this trail?" David asked.

"Maybe four or five times, I'm really not sure."

"Is every hike hard?"

"The first couple of days are always hard," Ray laughed. "But to be honest, I love being in the mountains. I love the sights, the sounds, the smells. I love the walking—putting one foot in front of the other, arms swinging, constantly moving towards a goal. The cadence of hiking is reassuring—the rhythm of walking, breathing, swinging my arms. When I do this the time goes by faster."

"To me it's boring."

"I'm sure this experience would be no fun to some people, but I think of hiking as moving along the straight and narrow path. Remember the two-and-a-half minute talks we'd give in Junior Sunday School when we were young?"

"I remember those well," David replied.

"Here's a two-and-a-half-minute talk for you: I will not arrive at my destination in a day or a week or a lifetime. But if I put one foot in front of the other, I'll eventually arrive at my goal. Kind of silly, but it gives me something to think about while I'm walking."

"You've got a point there. I think I'll try what you're doing. You're obviously feeling better than I am."

"Your body will adjust," Ray assured him. "Here's another two-and-a-half-minute thought: we're following this trail, but we don't go straight down the middle of the path. Because of the rocks, mud, puddles of water, and horse droppings, we move all over the trail as we hike forward. Sometimes we actually leave the trail for a short period. But as long as we stay near the trail and keep moving forward, we're progressing toward our goal. I've also learned from sad experience that it never pays to leave the trail and take a short cut. It may look quicker and easier, but in this country, short cuts always require more effort. The trail is here for a reason, laid out by people who've gone through here before."

After several minutes of hiking in silence, Ray asked, "David, have you noticed the trail signs?"

"I saw the sign that said 'Welcome to the National Forest.' I haven't seen anything since."

"Really? You've passed hundreds of them so far."

"I must be closer to death than I thought."

"Look ahead of you. What do you see?"

"Trees."

"Do you see anything that looks unnatural?"

David stopped walking and looked ahead, sticking his chin out and pushing up his hat in order to see more clearly, "I don't see anything unnatural."

"Look at the big tree on the right, about 20 yards ahead."

"Nothing. No, . . . wait a minute. Something doesn't look natural. Someone has carved a small letter 'i' in the trunk of the tree."

"The forest rangers do that so people like you and I can follow the trail," Ray explained. "But we can't stand here and look at it. We need to keep walking or we'll fall too far behind."

David focused more intently on the trail, "I see another marker carved into the big tree to the left."

"Good eyes. But watch out! You almost stepped *in* a trail marker."

"That's just horse crap," he replied, looking down as he stepped to the side.

"Yea, but horses use the same trail we do, so their droppings can mark the trail as well."

"With all the markings you'd have to be blind to lose this trail."

"That's true," Ray agreed. "But what about this meadow?" Directly in front of them lay a large treeless expanse covered with a brilliant yellow carpet of undisturbed grass. The grass seemed alive as it gently swayed under the wind's soft caress. The same stately pines they'd been hiking through ringed the meadow. Towering above the trees were rugged mountain peaks, the north side of each still covered in snow. The cascading sound of water danced in their ears. High above, two birds soared in lazy circles. Ray slowly moved his head back and forth, noticing every detail. He took a deep breath, adding the fresh forest fragrance to the sights and sounds.

The gentle breeze on his face quickly dried the tiny drops of perspiration, cooling his body. On every hike, Ray looked for moments like this—unannounced and easy to miss. This moment more than made up for the aching muscles and hard effort of the last 10 miles. He wished his son were next to him instead of hiking at the front of the group. *Eli would especially appreciate this, he thought*.

Ray felt alive in every way. He spoke softly so as not to break the spell. "David, do you realize that this is as beautiful as any spot on earth?"

Oblivious to the beauty in front of him, David stuck out his chin, pushed up his hat, and stated the obvious, "Dang, the trail disappears."

Ray sighed, realizing that David didn't see the beauty in front of him. But knowing they needed to keep going, he volunteered, "There are still trail markers out there."

"Where?" David asked while continuing to look at the grass.

"Stand still and slowly look at the top of the grass in front of you."

David stuck his chin out a bit further and squinted.

"Do you see any difference in—?"

"There it is," he said leaning to his right. "If you get the sun just right you can see where the grass has been disturbed. It's like a straight line through the meadow."

"Good eyes. What do you see at the end of the line?"

"There's a pile of rocks where the trail enters the trees again."

"Like this pile of rocks next to me?"

Looking down David exclaimed, "Dang! How'd I miss that?"

"It's easy to miss the trail," observed Ray, "if you don't know what to look for."

As they started across the meadow, following the faint line towards the pile of rocks, Ray continued, "Three rocks stacked on top of one another or several dozen rocks stacked in the shape of a pyramid aren't common in nature, so they're obvious trail signs. In some areas of the mountains, such as above the tree line, there are no trees or grass, but there are plenty of rocks. In those areas, you stay on the trail by going from one pyramidlike pile of rocks to the next. As long as you keep your eyes on the markers, you'll never get lost."

Sarcastically David replied, "Now that I know what to look for I can hike all over these mountains . . . providing that I don't die from the weight of my pack."

"But you've got to pay constant attention," Ray cautioned. "Even with all the markers we've talked about, the trail can be hard to follow in places."

As they entered the trees again, they saw the rest of the group 50 yards up the trail eating lunch.

"Here's a chance for you to eat a big lunch and lighten your pack a bit," Ray quipped, dropping his pack to the ground.

As they ate, they talked about their families.

"I get the impression," David said between bites of granola bar, "that you've spent a lot of time in the mountains with your family."

Finishing the handful of trail mix in his mouth, Ray replied, "I've been hunting, fishing, and backpacking with my sons since they were 6 or 7 years old. I thought everyone had a good time, but after Eli came out, I learned he never enjoyed the fishing or hunting part. He hated killing anything that was alive, although he appreciated the beauty of the outdoors more than the rest of us. In fact, he's the one who helped me learn to slow down and smell the pine cones."

David chuckled, "Dan was much the same. He seemed to enjoy the outdoors, but he never went hunting or fishing. I was always too busy to take him, so I'm glad the young men did lots of outdoor activities."

Ray closed his eyes, remembering. "Over the years we've had some great times on this trail. I remember snow falling in July, five straight days of rain in August, and six beautiful days of sunshine in October. It's hard to know what to expect on a hike like this, so you have to be prepared."

"Was there ever anything that you weren't prepared for?"

Ray thought for a moment, "Yes, falling into the river on my second hike with the youth. I got so wet and cold that I thought I'd never be warm again. The next day, just as I was beginning to warm up, I almost fell in again. As we crossed a large river, I stepped on a loose rock and lost my balance. As I began to fall, all I could think about was how cold I would be again.

"Suddenly I stopped falling. I looked back and there was Eli, standing knee-deep in the water, holding on to my pack for dear life. Although I could have pulled him in with me, he hadn't thought twice about jumping into the water to help me. He'll never know how much I appreciated his sacrifice. On that same hike, we'd just reached the top of Porcupine Pass when we got word that one of the fathers was sick. Eli dropped his pack and ran down the trail. Twenty minutes later, Eli reached the top of

the pass for the second time, dropped the second pack, and went back to help the struggling father.

"When others patted him on the back, he humbly said he was glad he could help. That's the kind of son he's always been. When he first told us he was gay, I forgot about all his good qualities. I'm thankful I was able to move past his same-sex attraction and see him again as the complete person he's always been."

David nodded in agreement.

Ray continued, "In a couple of days we'll camp near a large rock. From the top of the rock, you can see down the drainage that we hike up—it's an incredible view. During the same hike when I fell in the river, we lounged on that rock one evening watching the sunset. It was then that Eli taught his brothers and me how to appreciate more fully the beauty of the wilderness. After the sun went down, the air quickly turned cold, but the rock continued to radiate the sun's warmth. We laid on the rock and watched the stars come out. The Milky Way stretched like a ribbon of light across the heavens. The Spirit's warmth added to the warmth of the rock. We felt small in that vast wilderness under billions of stars.

"As we laid on the rock we talked about God and goals and dreams. My oldest son said he wanted to become a God so he could make everyone's life better. That led to a discussion about the purpose of trials and challenges in this life. I remember Eli saying that some day he wanted to lay on that very rock with his own sons and talk about God. He wanted his sons to feel God's love and their family's love just as he was feeling it at that moment."

"Eli talked about having children?" David asked.

"Yes, I can't remember a time before he came out when he didn't talk about marriage and a family. He loves children. If he could work through his attractions, I think he would make a wonderful father."

"That may not happen in this life, either for him or for Dan."

"True," Ray agreed, "but that night, as we laid on the rock and talked, every dream and goal seemed possible."

"I'm anxious to get to that rock for two reasons," David smiled. "First, to feel what you felt; second, when I reach the rock, I'll know we're almost to the end of the hike."

Ray laughed. After eating in silence for several minutes Ray inquired of David, "What are your trail markers in responding to Dan's same-sex attraction?"

"Trail markers in responding to same-sex attraction? I don't think I have any, do you?"

"You know me, I think too much. After going to the different support groups and attending the conference last year, I wrote down several things I felt were important. Would you like to look at them?"

"Sure."

Over the years, Ray had learned the secret of taking only essential items on the trail, including a lightweight triple combination and a journal. As they talked, he pulled these two items from his pack. Turning to a journal entry made shortly after the conference he read, "Guidelines for responding to the issue of same-sex attraction. Number one: the first principle of the gospel is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."

"That's part of the fourth article of faith," David said. "Why do you have that as number one?"

"Many people lose the trail because they think it's more important to respond to their child with love and tolerance than to have faith in Jesus Christ."

"But loving a child is important," David protested. "Didn't Christ respond to a question about what commandment was greatest by teaching that the first commandment is to love God and the second commandment is to love our neighbor? He commanded us to love others as He's loved us."

"You're right," Ray agreed. "Christ did teach that we should love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength. And He taught us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But He

also said, 'If ye love me, keep my commandments.' One commandment is to obey all God's laws. Joseph F. Smith taught that obedience is the first law of heaven. Jesus Christ loved and obeyed His Father perfectly. He's our example of the proper balance between love and obedience."

As Ray took a drink, David spoke, "Over the past year, I've tried to be more obedient. I still have a long way to go, though."

"Funny you should say that. I've noticed a change in the spirit of your comments in our high priests group. I can sense a change in you."

David nodded silently.

Ray continued, "Abraham is another example of great faith in Jesus Christ and great love. After he waited over a hundred years, his son Isaac was born. I can't imagine how Abraham must have felt when God commanded him to sacrifice his son. The Bible simply records that he rose up early in the morning to begin his journey. The Bible says that it was by faith that Abraham offered up Isaac. The heading for Hebrews, chapter 11, says that the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and others was centered in Christ. You and I must respond to our sons' same-sex attraction with faith centered in Jesus Christ, or we may lose the trail."

"I still think love is important."

"I totally agree," Ray said, handing the journal to David. "Go ahead and read number two."

"Number two: Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ all things are possible. The Atonement can change a man's very nature." David looked up, "I'm still not sure how much our sons can change."

"I understand," Ray agreed. "Change may be different for each person and may not happen in this life. Remember though, the Atonement makes change possible in the life of every person. In section 18 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Jesus Christ testifies that His sacrifice was for everyone: 'For, behold, the Lord

your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of *all men*, that *all men* might repent and come unto him.' Does 'all men' include our sons?"

"Yes."

"In the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin teaches that the natural man is an enemy to God." Ray looked at David, "Who's the natural man?"

"I guess everyone on the earth is sinful and natural and falls under that description."

"That's how I see it. Listen to what he says: 'For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord.' Can every 'natural man,' including our sons, become a saint through the Atonement of Christ?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"I agree. On to the next point."

"Number three," David began. "Follow the prophet . . . . Follow the prophet," he said again, almost to himself.

Ray quit picking the raisins out of his trail mix and looked up, "You okay?"

"I'm fine," David whispered. "I have a confession to make. After Dan told us about his feelings, I was devastated. I didn't know what to think or where to turn. Almost by accident, I stumbled on to the support group that you and I attended. They were warm, comfortable, and safe. You remember how you felt when you went—like you'd come home to a big, happy, supportive family?"

"I remember that feeling well," Ray responded.

David focused on the sunlight filtering through the trees. "Anyway, I was feeling incredibly guilty. I thought I was to blame for Daniel's struggles. I wanted to help him but didn't know how. Mitt and others in the group had the right answers to help me feel better. First, they said I wasn't to blame for Dan's homosexuality.

He was born gay. God had made him the way he was. I didn't have to try to change him—all I needed to do was love him. I loved him anyway, so continuing to love him was easy.

"From the beginning, their main message was to love and accept Dan without reservations or conditions. I knew the people in the group understood how I felt because we were all in the same situation. I was impressed that they didn't reject their gay children but loved and accepted them unconditionally. I was also impressed by the love they showed me. The first time I attended, I felt I was in the company of people I'd known for years. They calmed my fears and answered my questions. All they asked of me was to love Dan as Christ would love him."

David paused as he finished his granola bar. "When I asked about the Church's teachings, they responded that Church leaders and members weren't following the Savior's commandment to love. They felt that when the Church finally understood what the rest of the world already knew, it would welcome our children into the kingdom. Then our sons would receive every blessing.

"Subtly they made the Church the enemy. They said our gay children were good because God made them the way they were, while the prophet said they were wicked. They said our children deserved the right to be in a committed marriage relationship. They then taught that the prophet spoke out against the marriage relationship that our children deserved.

"Now I see that in their minds, equal rights were more important than what is eternally right. But, back then, I quickly bought into their message that love was more important than anything else and that all the Church offered was hate. The options they gave me were to love Dan as Christ loved him or reject Dan and follow the prophet."

He looked at Ray, "When you attended the support group last year, you asked Mitt if he'd prayed about what he was teaching the group. At that time, he said that he hadn't prayed because he didn't feel it was important. And, although that's how I felt, I couldn't get your question or Mitt's answer out of my mind.

"I continued to attend the group because I was dependent on their enthusiasm and support. But, like you, I never felt peace. When I was with the people at group, I was fine, but during the thousand quiet personal moments between meetings, my soul was in turmoil. I couldn't concentrate or relax. I felt I was missing something important in my life but didn't know what.

"When I shared my concerns with people at group, they said my feelings were the natural result of the way Dan had been treated by society and by the Church. They insisted that until our children were treated equally in every way, we as parents would feel the same uneasiness and distress our children felt. Everything revolved around our gay sons and daughters—their rights, their needs, their feelings. But meanwhile my own needs were overwhelming. My own soul screamed for relief that never came; I prayed for comfort but felt nothing."

Ray exhaled, "Amazing. We were living almost next door to each other, going through the same hell, and didn't realize it."

Looking directly at Ray, David reverently continued, "About that time, my wife got tickets to general conference. I went with her reluctantly. As the prophet entered the Conference Center I stood with everyone else and felt a peace I hadn't felt for months. During the meeting, I couldn't take my eyes off the prophet. I prayed . . . no, I pleaded with God to let me know if the prophet was the man I should follow in regards to Dan's homosexuality.

"As the prophet spoke for a few minutes at the conclusion of the session, I felt an outpouring of love from him that caused my heart to overflow with love." David paused, struggling with his emotions. "The Tabernacle Choir sang 'We Thank Thee, Oh God, for a Prophet' as the closing song. When they began the third verse, everyone in the Conference Center spontaneously stood and joined the choir. Tears streamed down my cheeks. The Spirit witnessed to my soul that there was a prophet of God in that room. I knew that I could follow him and that he wouldn't lead me astray in regards to my son. That experience changed my life." David closed his eyes as if reliving the memory.

For several minutes they both sat without speaking. Finally, Ray spoke in a hushed voice, "Thanks for sharing that experience. It's another testimony that God is mindful of us and our sons. I had a similar experience with the Spirit eight or nine months ago that saved my life."

David nodded as Ray went on, "Let me see if I can relate our need to follow the prophet to our hiking experience. Yesterday, remember how far we could see from the top of Rocky Sea Pass?"

"I do," David responded. "Through the sweat dropping in my eyes I could see miles across the drainage to our next goal, Dead Horse Pass."

Ray laughed, "But as we came down off the pass and into the trees, we forgot to follow the trail markers and became disoriented. The trees blocked the sun and the landmarks we'd picked out from the top of Rocky Sea Pass. We lost our orientation until a couple of the guys hiked above the trees and took a compass reading. Then we knew exactly which direction to go. Although there are markers along the trail, at times we don't pay attention or we get lazy.

"Down in the valley the trees blocked our view. In regards to same-sex attraction, there is a forest of trees blocking our view. Some of the trees are bogus scientific research, our emotions, our concerns about being politically correct, our own egos, our love for our children, and our feelings of guilt, fear, anger, and pain."

"But if we listen to the prophet's voice, we can find our way through those trees," David interjected.

"That's right," Ray nodded. "We need to remember that the prophet is on the mountain top while the rest of the world is wandering among the trees. The prophet teaches that each person is a son or daughter of heavenly parents and that gender is an essential characteristic of each person's eternal identity. He reminds us that everyone is born with susceptibilities, tendencies, or feelings and that all of God's children have the power to choose how they will respond to life's challenges."

David noticed that the others farther down the trail were beginning to put on their packs. "Looks like it's time to go. Thanks for talking with me. Do you have any other trail markers?"

"One more. Number four: I can change only myself. I can love Eli with all my heart, but I can't change him."

David adjusted his pack. "That one I agree with whole heartedly. You talked so much about the power of the Atonement that I thought you'd tell me I could change my son."

"I learned the hard way that doesn't work," Ray said as he lifted his own pack onto his back. "I'll tell you about my painful learning experiences as we're hiking. Let's move out."

CHAPTER 24

Ray was petrified. Attending his first conference a year ago had changed his life. He'd learned much since then, especially about how to put his knowledge into action. When invited to give back by helping others, he'd readily agreed. But now he stood in front of 15 parents who were anxious to know how to help a child who had feelings of same-sex attraction. From the short introductions, it was obvious to Ray that these parents loved their children.

After a final silent prayer, Ray began, "Two and a half years ago, my son told me he was gay. That began an intense period of spiritual growth in my life. I don't have all the answers, but together I think we can help each other. To begin, I need a volunteer. Could you help me?" he pointed to Nicole, a petite woman sitting on the front row.

"Sure."

"Okay, come up here and face the class."

As Nicole came up, Ray moved so she couldn't see what he was holding behind his back.

Facing her, with his back to the class, Ray instructed, "Nicole, I want you to pretend you're my mother. I've always been your best son, obedient, kind, and helpful. Several times you've told neighbors you wished all your children were as good as I am. But I have a secret I've hidden from you for years. I'm going to hand you something that will make you aware of my secret. When I hand it to you, I want you to take it from me and hold it up so the class can see what the secret is. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," she replied hesitantly.

Ray swung the 30-pound dumbell from behind his back, and holding it by the ends, handed it to Nicole. She grabbed it awkwardly by the bar with both hands but almost dropped the heavy weight. Bending over she gained control of the dumbell and using her entire body swung the weight up to her chest. Everyone in the room laughed, not at Nicole and her struggles, but at the words Ray had attached to each end of the dumbell: "I'm Gay."

Continuing the role-play, Ray stepped back, "Mother, thanks for letting me share my secret with you. I feel great. I don't have to carry that heavy burden around anymore. Bye, Mom, I'm out of here," Ray started for the door.

"You come back here," Nicole commanded. "I can't hold this weight much longer." Everyone laughed again, only this time less heartily, for each had felt the crushing weight the dumbell symbolized.

"Thanks for your help, Nicole." Ray took the weight from her and placed it on the floor. "You're a great mother."

Ray surveyed the class, "Did any of you feel like Nicole when you found out that a loved one experienced same-sex attraction?"

Every head nodded and several hands went up.

"Will you please share what you felt when you found out about your loved one's secret? As you talk I'll write a few key words on the board. Go ahead."

Everyone wanted to talk. Mary, sitting at the back of the room, spoke first, "When my son came out I felt totally alone. He told me not to tell anyone else. It ate away at me until I thought I would go crazy."

Under the heading, "My Experience," Ray wrote "Alone" and "Hiding a huge secret" on the board.

"I didn't have that problem," said Pat, a thin, gray-haired woman on the other side of the room. "My son was picked up by the police in an Internet sting. His face and story was on the nightly news. I felt I had failed as a parent. I continue to feel guilt and self-hatred. Now that he's in jail, I fear for his safety."

"My son blamed me when he came out," a father volunteered. "He said I never took the time to do what he wanted to do."

Stephanie, a heavy-set woman on the front row responded, "My situation was almost exactly like your role play. I knew my son was struggling with something. He was unhappy, even depressed. After he shared his secret with me, he became free as a bird. He had support, but I had none. And now I had this huge secret that I couldn't share with anyone else."

Another person added, "I felt pressure from my family and others to accept the world's teachings that my son was born gay."

As he continued to write, Ray asked, "How many of you had to face pressure from friends and family to just accept that your child was born gay?" Most people in the room raised their hand.

Ruth, sitting with her husband near the window, said, "We went to our bishop, but he didn't know what to do. We talked, but he couldn't give us concrete suggestions or help."

"Wait a minute," Ray said, trying to keep up. "Okay, any others?"

Several others responded.

"Okay, here's the list." Ray stepped back and examined what he'd written on the board.

My Experience

Feelings:

- Alone
- Hiding a huge secret
- Guilt
- Heavy burden
- Self-hatred
- Failure as a parent
- Blame
- Shame
- Fear

Lack of support and understanding from:

- Family
- Church leaders
- Friends

Influence of the World:

Born that way

Love your child or you're bad

The Church is wrong

Ray turned to the class, "Next question: how should a person respond to a loved one experiencing same-sex attraction?"

"You love, love, love them. Then love them some more," several people exclaimed.

Ray wrote "Love, Love, Love!" on the other side of the white board under the heading "My Response."

"You must love the sinner but hate the sin," Pat interjected. "I find that so hard to do. I love my son but don't want to facilitate his unacceptable behavior."

"That's a fine line," Ray agreed as he continued to write. Finally he stepped back and read, "Number one: Love, love, love the individual. Number two: Don't support or enable unrighteous behavior."

"Okay?" he asked as he turned to face the class.

Heads nodded in agreement.

"What are other things we can do?"

"Trust in the Lord. Have faith that He knows what is happening and that He can help."

"Listen with love. Our children need people who will listen without criticism or judgment."

"Read the scriptures, fast, and pray."

"Follow the prophet. He knows the way."

"Continue to attend church. Attend the temple."

"Follow the promptings of the Spirit."

"Recognize and fulfill your own needs."

"I found that I had to talk with others to keep my sanity."

Others added comments about keeping temple covenants, obeying the commandments, and trying to understand the person with the attractions.

"And always remember Jesus Christ," Ray finished writing and stepped back. "Did I get everything?" he asked as he reviewed the list of suggestions.

My Response:

1. Love, Love, Love the individual!
2. Don't support or enable the unrighteous behavior
3. Trust in the Lord. Have faith that He can help
4. Listen with love! Don't criticize
5. Read scriptures, fast, pray
6. Follow the prophet
7. Attend church. Attend the temple
8. Follow the Spirit
9. Recognize and meet your own needs
10. Talk to others
11. Keep temple covenants
12. Obey the commandments
13. Try to understand your son or daughter
14. Always remember the Savior

"Excellent suggestions." Ray faced the class. "Out of these responses, what has and has not worked for you?"

"I have a challenge with numbers 4 and 13 on the list," Stephanie responded. "Every time I talk with my son or try to understand what he's thinking, we end up arguing and screaming at each other. What am I doing wrong?"

Harold, an older, white-haired gentleman on the back row, spoke up for the first time. "I don't know what you're doing wrong, but I know what works for me. When my son came out, he was defensive and critical of everyone. I tried everything but couldn't get him to open up.

"One day I realized that I was the problem. All my questions were in reality judgment statements. For example, he'd come upstairs in the morning dressed in the strangest clothing. I'd say something like, 'Where did you get those ugly clothes?' I'm sure you can imagine his response to that question. After I recognized what I was doing, I started asking questions like, 'John, tell me what you like about the shirt you're wearing.' He had a reason for everything, and was always willing to share. Through this approach, I began to understand what he was thinking.

"Shortly after he told me about his attractions, I asked him where his abominable feelings had come from. He swore at me and left the room. Later my questions changed to, 'John, will you share with me what you're feeling right now?' or 'John, tell me when you realized that you were attracted to other men?' His response to these questions helped me understand what he was feeling. I learned what he had gone through. I was heartbroken as he shared the loneliness and pain he'd felt."

Harold continued in a subdued tone, "I had to listen without judgment or he'd shut up. He was exposing himself to me and trust was critical. After I asked the same question three or four times, he told me to start writing down his answers. I did. I know my son much better now."

Susan, a middle-aged woman with an infectious smile, raised her hand, "I had a similar experience. But I didn't have to ask many questions. My son wanted to talk, and I just listened. I found that he didn't understand his feelings any better than I did. By talking about his feelings though, he has come to understand himself better. He's now making better decisions than he was in the past."

"Susan, did you preach to him?" Ray questioned.

"I did once and he quit talking for several days. As I've listened to him, I learned that he remembers what I taught him during his childhood. I've been able to help him understand those childhood teachings in light of his current feelings."

"Do you tell him that you love him?"

"I tell him every day." Her smile grew bigger. "When he came out he hated himself, but now he's beginning to see himself as a person of value."

Ray addressed the class, "How often do you tell the person experiencing same-sex attraction that you love him or her?"

The answers ranged from a dozen times a day to never.

Ray lingered in front of Carla, who'd indicated she never told her son that she loved him. But before he could ask her to explain, Kim spoke up. "I'd like to share my experience about

point number 4 on the list: love the sinner but hate the sin. When my son came out, we were already a dysfunctional family. His announcement tore the family apart. We kicked him out of the house, and for many years, we didn't know where he was living. Finally, several of his siblings found him. Today, after many years, after much repenting and changing . . ." she stopped, fighting to control her emotions, "after all this time and after a lifetime of mistakes, we are a family again and have a healthy relationship with our son and brother."

After another pause she continued, "Last month he told me that he didn't believe in God, but then added, 'If I did believe in God, I imagine that His love would be like the love I feel from my family.'" The room was quiet as she added, "I think the family is finally doing something right. He's still in the lifestyle, he knows what we believe, but he also knows without a doubt that we love him."

"Thank you," Ray said as he pointed to another person with a hand up.

"When our daughter told us she was lesbian, my husband and I gave her ultimatums and burned bridges that we've never been able to rebuild. I realize now that my daughter has her agency and can choose what she'll do. I beg each of you to not make the mistake we did. No parent can stop a child from leaving the home, but there is no need to push him or her out the door. Once children are gone they might never come back."

"What if your child is doing inappropriate activities in the home?" Susan asked.

Mary, who had been sitting quietly since making the first comment, instructed, "You are in charge of your home. You're responsible for the spirit in your home, and you have the right to set standards of behavior. If a child or anyone else won't respect your rules, you have a right to ask them to leave."

Ray thought of his experience with Eli and added, "A parent must walk a fine line. When you ask a disobedient child to leave your home, you may lose the opportunity to influence that

child. When you allow a disobedient child to remain at home, you may lose the Spirit. Each situation is different; you must try your best to do what the Spirit directs."

Nicole spoke, "My son told me not to tell anyone that he's gay, but I need to talk to somebody. What can I do?"

Carolyn, an older women sitting next to Nicole, took her hand, "When my son told me about his attractions he told me to never tell another person. I kept his secret and my own pain, fear, and guilt bottled up inside for over 10 years. Finally, I told him I couldn't live alone with his secret any longer. He hadn't understood what I was feeling and apologized for causing me such pain. We discussed the people I wanted to visit with. He told several of them about his situation and I told the others. My son also felt better after finally sharing his feelings with others. When I was able to talk to a few trusted friends, the weight I felt almost disappeared. Few can carry this burden alone; no one should have to."

Several people nodded their heads in agreement. All looked at Harold as he began to speak, "We must remember that this is our son or daughter who experiences same-sex attraction. We can't shout their secret from the rooftop. I know my son felt empowered to be able to choose when and to whom to tell his story. I've tried to educate those I've told—help them understand the difference between homosexual behavior and same-sex attraction. I point out to them that my son is still the same talented person they've always known and loved."

"We need to respect our loved ones who feel the attractions," added Carolyn, "but also realize that we have our own needs. Pray for direction. The Spirit can help you to do what's best for you and your loved one. Nicole, here's my phone number if you ever need to talk."

Pat timidly asked, "What do each of you pray for in regards to your loved one? When my son came out, I prayed that God would heal or fix him. When that didn't happen, I prayed that God would change him in some way. Now I realize that a positive

answer to my petitions would have deprived my son of his agency. Today, I don't know what to pray for."

"When my daughter came out," another woman began, "I prayed that she'd gain understanding and know that she wasn't gay. Later I prayed that God would heal my daughter. When I shared that with my brother, he told me that my daughter wasn't sick, that she'd been born the way she was. Now I pray that God will do what's right, but I don't have much faith."

"After our son moved out of the home," Ruth began, "we prayed that God would bring him back. We now understand that God will never force our son to return against his will. We finally realized that our son is much like a person who is not of our faith. We don't pray that God will force a person to join the Church. We do pray that God will soften a person's heart and prepare him to hear the gospel message. We pray that God will lead the missionaries to those who are prepared to hear the gospel. We always pray with faith that God will answer our prayers in behalf of the missionaries."

"Using that as a guide," her husband, Jim, interjected, "Ruth and I pray that God will soften our son's heart and prepare him. We pray that he will meet people and have experiences that will help him make correct choices. We ask God to bless him to remember what he's been taught and to be receptive to the Spirit. We pray that our son will feel God's love and recognize our love. And we pray for our son with faith that God will answer our prayers."

"Remember," Harold added, "that God knows our son or daughter, husband or wife better than we do. He wants the best for them now and in the eternities. Prayer is an opportunity to bring our will into line with His will. We begin to see and understand our loved one as God sees him or her. And we begin to know what God wants us to do in relation to our loved one.

"In fact, we must be spiritually prepared in order to pray properly. The Doctrine and Covenants teaches, 'He that asketh in the Spirit asketh according to the will of God; wherefore it

is done even as he asketh.' If we pray on a regular basis and are spiritually prepared, we can know God's will for us and for our loved one who struggles."

Carolyn, still holding Nicole's hand, interjected, "When we choose our response to God's will, we also choose how happy or miserable we will be in this life."

Ray looked at her, "That's an interesting comment. Please continue."

"I'll talk about happiness and misery from a parent's point of view because that's what I know. Some parents feel their child deserves the same opportunities and privileges other Church members enjoy. They don't care about God's will because they feel they know more than God does. They want God to conform to what they think is right.

"When change doesn't happen as they desire, they feel their child has received a raw deal. They continue to fight. Although nothing may change, they do receive a reward, such as the praise and recognition of the world. More often than not, the real needs of the son or daughter are forgotten as the parents strive for more and more of the world's approval. They also receive the misery promised to all those who choose to follow Satan. In the end, Satan forsakes them and they're left without support."

Glancing around the room, she continued, "On the other hand, parents with faith in Jesus Christ understand the plan of salvation, the power of the Atonement, and the potential for growth and change in this life and the next. They know they don't have all the answers, but they do have faith that Jesus Christ can and will sustain them. They believe that because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ every person can progress. They're guided by the Spirit and are blessed with the peace and comfort promised to the righteous."

"Thank you," Ray said. "That's an interesting perspective. From my own experiences, I testify that what you say is true. Now I need to change the subject and share a word of warning. In Acts chapter 20, verse 29, the Apostle Paul warns the Saints

about grievous wolves entering into the Church from outside. In the next verse he warns, 'Also of your own selves,' or from inside the Church, 'shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.' We're all aware of those on the outside who pressure the Church on the issue of same-sex attraction. But there are some within the Church who also fully support the goals of the larger gay community. They live with one foot in the Church and one foot in the world.

"The Old Testament contains an interesting story about a prophet of God who did the same thing. In the story, Balak, king of Moab, was worried about the approaching Israelite people. He offered Balaam, God's prophet, great rewards if he would curse the Israelites. Balaam refused to go against the word of the Lord and curse Israel. The king offered greater rewards, which Balaam also refused. But he did accept an offer to live in Moab. So there he was—God's prophet to Israel living among Israel's enemies. Although Balaam never cursed Israel, he was so anxious to receive the world's rewards that he eventually suggested ways to tempt Israel to sin, causing them to lose God's protection. In Revelation this kind of action is referred to as the '[D]octrine of Balaam, who taught Bala[k] to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.'"

Looking up, Ray cautioned, "Today, some members of the Church follow the doctrine of Balaam by introducing the world's teachings regarding homosexuality into the Church. They feel the teachings of the prophet and the Church are wrong. They teach that men are born gay and that change is impossible. Their goal is to change the doctrine of the Church so that their children can enjoy every blessing of the gospel, including same-sex marriage and temple sealing."

"And how do they feel such changes will come about?" asked Nicole.

Ray replied thoughtfully, "They feel change will come about through outside pressure or through new revelation, such as the

one that allowed all worthy males to receive the priesthood. Their approach is to apply pressure from within the Church while encouraging the world's pro-gay organizations to apply pressure from the outside.

"They feel that love and tolerance are more important than faith. They teach that "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" is doctrinally incorrect. They claim that the Church is bigoted and homophobic and has no right to speak out against same-sex marriage."

"We must always remember," Harold interrupted, "that the teachings of the Church regarding same-sex attraction are consistent with every other doctrine and teaching of the Gospel. Over many years, men we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators have developed the position taken by the Church."

"That's a good point," Ray agreed, "and because we believe those men are inspired, we have faith that the position the Church takes is God's position, not men's." Glancing at his watch, he continued, "This has been a good discussion, but we're almost out of time. Are there any other issues you'd like to discuss?"

Ruth raised her hand, "After our son came out, my husband and I were given several quotes that stated that through our obedience and temple sealing our child would be exalted. Is that correct doctrine?"

Ray theatrically slapped his forehead, "Thank you. I forgot to mention those quotes. I think all of us have seen statements that say our wayward child will be saved through our righteousness. I first read those quotes myself over a year after my son came out. They brought comfort and peace to my soul. My wife and I felt relieved that all our children, especially our son experiencing same-sex attraction, would be part of our family in the eternities. But as I continued to visit with my son, I realized that in his current frame of mind, he wouldn't be happy in the celestial kingdom. I wondered about his agency. As a son of God, he can choose to believe and do as he wants; that's his God-given right. I can't force my son to act against his will. Agency is a basic law of heaven.

"I feel that in the next life my son will continue to have opportunities to learn, grow, repent, and make choices. There may be conditions in the next life that will help him choose to return to God. It's possible that in some way I do not currently understand, my faithfulness in keeping temple covenants will have an influence on him."

"But in the end mercy cannot rob justice," Harold interjected.

"That's right," Ray agreed. "All children born in the covenant are sealed to their parents, but being sealed to righteous parents doesn't guarantee that children will be exalted in God's kingdom. All people, including our wayward children, must work out their own salvation. In the end, Jesus Christ will reward each person according to his or her individual faithfulness and obedience. Although Christ will be merciful, justice will be satisfied."

Ray looked at his watch again. "Time's up. Let's have a quick review of what we can do as parents." Ray pointed to one person after another.

"The most important thing is to strengthen your own faith in Jesus Christ."

"Love, love, love your child."

"Keep the lines of communication open."

"Don't throw your child out of the house."

"Fill your own life with positive activities that help nurture the Spirit."

"Follow the promptings of the Spirit."

"And always remember Jesus Christ," Ray added. Looking over the class, he felt a common bond; they had each felt similar pain, guilt, and loneliness. "Thanks for your comments. I pray that you will seek Jesus Christ. He alone can ease your burdens and strengthen you to bear them up. I love you."

As people rose to leave, Ray quickly approached Carla and asked, "Why don't you tell your son that you love him?"

In a quivering voice she replied, "My son killed himself six months ago. I did all I could . . . I tried everything . . . I loved him . . . it wasn't enough. He's lost forever . . . "

"Please sit down. What was your son's name?"

"Cody."

"Please tell me about Cody."

Carla quietly talked about her son. She'd loved and protected him, and built her life around him. His death had devastated her. Sobbing, she tried to explain the eternal loss she felt.

Ray took her hand, "Carla, there's much that we don't understand about this life. We know even less about life in the spirit world. In speaking of God, Nephi testified, 'I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.' Like Nephi, we don't know the meaning of all things. In relation to your son's death, we don't know what he was thinking or feeling; we don't know his pain or what led up to that final act. Because we don't know these things, we cannot judge Cody or his actions.

"There's much, however, that we do know. We know that Jesus Christ loves Cody. We know that He understands Cody. We know that He felt every pain and sorrow that Cody felt while on earth. Jesus Christ, with His perfect understanding and his perfect love, will be the perfect and merciful judge."

Ray opened his scriptures, "We know that God's plan to save all His children, including Cody, continues into the next life. President Joseph F. Smith saw this in vision. Listen to the comforting doctrine in these verses: 'I beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead. The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God, and after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation.'

"Carla, I testify that Cody will continue to have his agency in the next life. He'll be able to make choices, repent, and progress.

And some of the physical challenges he experienced in this life won't bother him in the spirit world."

Looking intently at the woman in front of him he asked, "Now, Carla, what do *you* need to do?"

She looked surprised, "I'm not the one who took my life. Why talk about me?"

"Because, you're the one who must go on living. Tell me about yourself."

Shrugging her shoulders, she whispered, "I'm alone. There's nothing more to tell."

Ray took her hand, "You're not alone. You have a Father in Heaven who loves you. You have a Savior who loves you. They understand you perfectly. They will speak to you in a still, small voice. They will . . ."

CHAPTER 25

"Sister Whitt, what a pleasure to meet you!" Ray smiled as he took the older woman's hand. Sister Whitt was small and reminded him of a porcelain doll. From the top of her white hair to her shoes, which perfectly matched her silk blouse and wool skirt, nothing was amiss. Ray felt as if he was looking at a perfect person. The room they were in reminded Ray of a movie set created for a romantic Victorian film. There was a place for everything, and everything appeared beautifully arranged.

At Ray's greeting, Sister Whitt looked up as if in a trance. She didn't smile; she didn't even nod as tears started streaming down her cheeks.

Oh, oh, Ray wondered. *What have I gotten myself into?*

He remembered the call he had received several days before from her husband. "Brother Neels, this is Walter Whitt. I work with your neighbor, David. He said you may be able to help my wife."

"I'll try. What's her concern?"

"We have a son who's gay and it's killing my wife. Your neighbor David tried talking to her and got nowhere. He suggested I visit with you. Personally I don't think you'll be able to help either."

"It's . . . so . . . wrong, so very . . . very, very wrong," she cried, her entire body shaking with sobs. Ray looked at Brother Whitt, who stared back without a word. After several minutes, Sister Whitt's sobbing subsided although her body continued to shake.

"Sister Whitt, please tell me how I can help," Ray began with a gentle smile and calming voice.

Ray thought she was going to start crying again, but she took a deep breath. "You can't help. Nobody can help. My only son's gay!" She almost spit the words out. "On a beautiful spring morning, fifteen years ago he came to me while I was working in the garden. He destroyed that beautiful morning and every morning that followed when he whispered, 'Mom, I'm gay.' I died that day."

"Tell me about him. What's his name?"

"His name's Val. He's the youngest of our three children. His sisters were good girls, but he glowed with an inner light. He always tried to choose the right. He was obedient, caring, a hard worker. He'd hurt when I was sad. He'd say, 'Mother, let me hug you.' Then he'd hug me until I smiled. He was the class valedictorian in high school. He dated the junior prom queen, was the lead man in school plays, played first chair violin in the orchestra, and led the Seminary council. He served a mission and earned a law degree. He's never been rich because he's always helping others and giving his money to the poor."

"Wow," Ray exclaimed, "sounds like a great son."

"He was a good son—until I found out he was gay. As he grew up, I loved to be with him, but now we fight when we're together." She wiped away tears that were starting again but managed to keep her composure. "Last time Val visited, I was so happy to see him when he walked off the plane. Then I saw his partner . . . I just wanted to die. I would've been so embarrassed if a neighbor had seen them together. As soon as I saw his partner, I got angry. When I get angry, I speak before I think. I said the wrong thing, and we fought all the way home. We fought the whole time he was here."

"Sister Whitt, when you think of your son, what do you think of?" Ray asked.

"What he . . . and that horrible partner . . . must do."

"What do you mean, 'must do?'"

"You know . . . at night . . . in bed."

"That's what you think of when you think of your son?"

"That, and the fights we have. And that he'll never marry, and we'll never have grandchildren to carry on our name."

"Where does Val live?"

Brother Whitt, who'd sat silently listening, spoke up.

"He's the director of a homeless shelter on the West Coast. He started working at the shelter as a counselor. With his law degree, he was able to help many of the homeless with their legal problems. The job was perfect for him. He's always been kind and loving, always concerned with the welfare of others. When he applied for the position as director, they knew he was gay but hired him anyway."

"What do you mean, 'They hired him anyway?'" Ray inquired. "Maybe they were looking for someone who was kind and loving, not for someone who was straight."

"That may be true," Brother Whitt replied thoughtfully. He sat on the couch in his cover-alls, a large man with large hands that he constantly rubbed together. He looked rough and rugged—the exact opposite of his porcelain perfect wife.

"Under Val's direction," Brother Whitt continued, "they've expanded the shelter and modernized their kitchen. He's got the homeless people making hats and quilts for others in the world who have even less than they do. The people love Val—absolutely love him."

"I'm impressed," Ray said sincerely. "He must be an amazing son. In some ways, my son, Eli, is a lot like Val. He did well in school and studied piano performance in college. He was obedient, helpful, served a mission, tried to do what was right. I loved him and was so proud of him. Then he told me he was gay. I immediately forgot about his talents, his sensitive nature, his fun personality. I was obsessed with the thought that he was gay. Overnight, everything else that made my son special to me vanished. I became depressed; our relationship deteriorated. Let me try to illustrate what happened."

Ray picked up the note pad he'd placed on the table as he sat down. "Image that this room represents everything in your son's life—his talents, his interests, his service, his education, his joys and sorrows, his empathy, his love for others. Now image this notebook represents his attractions towards other men." Ray walked across the room, standing the notebook on the baby grand piano. "This notebook is now a part of everything that makes your son who he is, but only a part."

Ray picked up the notebook and holding it waist high walked towards Sister Whitt, "As I move this notebook closer to your face, what happens?"

"It becomes bigger," she replied softly.

"That's right. Now what does it do to the rest of the room?" He was holding the notebook six inches from her face.

"I can't see as much of the room."

"What happens if you focus on the notebook?"

Cross-eyed, she concentrated on the notebook. "The rest of the room is out of focus."

"Now what do you see?" Ray asked as he moved the book closer to her nose.

"Only the book," she whispered.

Ray returned to the piano and placed the notebook on it. Turning to Sister Whitt he said, "When you focus on your son's same-sex attraction, it becomes the only thing you see. You've made your son one-dimensional. He's like one note played over and over on this beautiful piano."

Ray began to strike the same key again and again, "You've made your son one boring, repetitive note, when in reality his life is a vibrant, energetic symphony full of love, compassion, and service. Have you ever looked over the Grand Canyon during a storm or as the sun was setting?"

"Yes," she answered meekly, "we took the children there years ago."

"At sunset the canyon is bathed in brilliant color. The walls seem alive as shadow and light play hide and seek. Now imagine

you're standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon with a notebook an inch from your nose. What a waste that would be. In the same way, it's a waste for you to view the whole of your son's life with a notebook an inch from the tip of your nose. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes, I think so. But what if people find out?"

"Find out what?"

"That he's gay."

"If people know that Val feels same-sex attractions, will that change who he is?" Ray asked.

"No."

"But if people find out about his attractions, will that change what they think about you?"

"Oh yes!" she sobbed.

Ray looked directly at Sister Whitt, "Is your real worry what people may think about you?" he asked gently. "Are you especially concerned about what your extended family may think about you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" She sobbed, her body again shaking uncontrollably. "My family . . . must never . . . know. They must . . . never know."

"Why?"

Fighting to maintain her composure, she replied softly, "Since I was a child, I've felt my brothers and sisters were judging me. Their homes were always beautiful and their families were so good. Now all their children are grown and married. And Val's not married. He'll never be married."

"Have any of your brothers or sisters learned about Val's struggles?"

"No one knows."

"Is it possible that members of your extended family face some challenging situations? And have they been able to hide their challenges as successfully as you've hidden Val's attractions?"

"I don't know."

Ray continued, "When I served as bishop, I found that there were no perfect families in the ward. No matter how wonderful a family looked on the outside, there were always challenges and struggles on the inside."

Brother Whitt rubbed his hands, "He's right, Olivia. You're aware of some of the challenges your brothers and sisters face. You know that none of their families are perfect."

She reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"Sister Whitt, is it possible for you to see your son as a whole person and not fixate on that one part of his life?"

"I don't know," she replied without looking up.

"From what you've said, Val's a good man. The people at the homeless shelter love him—and *they know* about his same-sex attraction."

Olivia continued to look at the ground, slowly nodding her head.

"He's got a point there, Olivia," Walter agreed, beginning to see past his son's same-sex attraction. "In fact, don't you get calls and letters from people whom Val's helped, thanking you for raising such a wonderful son?"

"I do," she replied. "They thank me for raising a good son, but I feel I've failed. He has that awful friend, and he doesn't go to church."

"But didn't you do the best you could as a mother?"

Olivia held up her hands and shrugged. Ray pleaded with God to touch her heart, to help her see the good in herself and in her son.

"You've never seen a better mother than Olivia," Walter volunteered. "She did everything she could for her children. All of them were straight 'A' students. They were kind and caring to everyone. Why, Olivia typed all of Val's school assignments. She had the ability to make every assignment a bit better. Olivia, remember when you stayed up all night typing Val's paper during his second year of law school?" Turning to Ray he explained, "When Val was in law school he had a crash project. He wrote the paper as Olivia

typed it. She went to bed around 5 a.m. that morning, got up an hour later, and helped Val get ready for school. If I remember correctly Val got the highest score in the class."

"But what good did it do?" she moaned. "Look at the kind of life he's living now."

"Sister Whitt," Ray sighed. "Remember that you're going to think of more than just your son's sexual orientation. I think there is a lot in Val's life to be proud of."

As if she didn't hear Ray's comment she continued, "I feel that God's punishing me. I just don't know what I did to deserve it."

"Please look at me," Ray commanded gently. Slowly she raised her head. "When life doesn't turn out as we plan, it's easy to feel that God is displeased with us. But in every age, good and righteous people have suffered afflictions and trials through no fault of their own. Think how Laman and Lemuel treated Nephi. When Lehi blessed his posterity, he specifically told his son Jacob that he had suffered much at the hands of his brothers. But then Lehi promised Jacob that God would consecrate his afflictions for his gain. Elsewhere in the scriptures we learn that the adversity and afflictions we encounter in this life will give us experience and be for our good."

"I'm so tired," she sighed, dropping her head. She appeared totally defeated, crumpled in the chair with her arms hanging limp, her chin resting on her chest.

"Sister Whitt, Jesus Christ can heal your heart and your soul if you'll give Him the chance."

"Do you *think* He can help me, even after all these years?" she asked so quietly that Ray hardly heard her.

"No, I don't think He can. Sister Whitt, please look at me."

Slowly, as if taking all her remaining energy, her eyes rose to meet his. Ray's heart overflowed with love and empathy for this sweet, suffering woman. He boldly testified, "I *know* Jesus Christ can heal you." He pleaded that the Spirit could make her feel that what he was saying was not only true, but that it was true for her.

"Christ has invited each of us to come unto Him and He will give us rest. After His resurrection, He visited the righteous people in the new world. Remember how He invited all who were afflicted in any manner to come unto Him and be healed?"

She nodded.

Ray opened his scriptures. "In 3 Nephi it says that 'all the multitude, with one accord, did go forth with their sick and their afflicted . . . and with all them that were afflicted in any manner; and he did heal them every one.' Christ's ability to heal extends to those who feel inadequate, fearful, or alone. His ability to heal extends to those who have had their dreams shattered. His ability to heal extends even to those who have been deeply hurt by those they dearly love.

Ray turned to another scripture. "Alma taught that Christ 'shall go forth suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people . . . , and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.'

"Sister Whitt, Jesus Christ has felt your personal pain. He's felt and He understands your deepest anguish, your darkest fears, your most terrifying thoughts. He's experienced and conquered every negative feeling of your heart. If you'll allow Him into your life, He can help you. He can heal your pain, He can give you rest, He can bring you peace."

Olivia sat staring at the floor. Finally, she whispered, "Val and his two sisters were adopted. I felt I was being punished when I was unable to have children of my own. When Val told me he was gay, I felt God was punishing me again for being a bad mother."

Ray, continuing to pray in his heart, replied, "Sister Whitt, I assure you that God is not punishing you. No one is perfect. You're too quick to dwell on your own imperfections and shortcomings. But your imperfections and shortcomings don't define

you. Sister Whitt, you are a daughter of a loving Heavenly Father. You have many talents and godly attributes. This beautiful room is only one example of your talents."

For just an instant, Ray thought he saw a smile. Pointing at the notebook still standing on the piano, he continued, "That notebook represents your shortcomings and imperfections. The rest of this beautiful room represents the rest of your life—your talents, your skills, your Christlike attributes. Now, do I need to hold the notebook right in front of your face to make my point?"

"No, no," she replied softly, "that won't be necessary. I understand what you're saying. I can't continue to focus on my mistakes."

"That's correct, especially for what you consider are mistakes but really aren't," Ray agreed. "You also can't blame yourself for the choices your children make. They have their agency, and you can't control the many people and events that influence them. Even the most conscientious parents have children who rebel."

"You know that's right, Olivia," Walter said. "We both know parents who've done everything possible to raise righteous and obedient children, yet have had a child wander—even our own heavenly parents had children who rebelled."

As she looked up, Ray noticed a change in her countenance. "I guess I've never understood," she said meekly. "For the first time I realize that Val has agency. He can choose. Maybe I'm really not to blame; maybe it's not my fault."

"Not in this sinful world," Ray assured her. "God isn't punishing you. Do you believe in Jesus Christ, that He's your Savior and Redeemer?"

"I do."

"Do you believe Jesus Christ?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you believe Jesus Christ when He said, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest?' Do you believe that Christ has lovingly promised you, 'Peace I leave

with you, my peace I give unto you. . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid?'"

"I do," she replied, "although I haven't allowed myself to feel peace for years." Ray detected a glimmer of hope in her eyes as she looked at him. "But as we've talked, I've felt different, as if Jesus Christ knows me and loves me."

"I testify that He does love you. Have you talked with Val since his last visit?"

"No, I haven't because I felt so bad about our fighting. I did talk to the bishop. He listened quietly and told me to write a letter and tell Val that I love him."

"Excellent idea. Do it!"

She continued, "The bishop said I should tell him that even though I don't approve of his lifestyle, I do love him."

Ray replied carefully, "Please follow your bishop's counsel and write to Val. But don't preach to him. My experience is that men who feel same-sex attractions who've been raised by righteous parents know exactly what Mom and Dad believe is right and wrong. The thing they forget is that Mom and Dad love them. They forget that Jesus Christ loves them. Many of them don't love themselves, so they feel no one else can love them."

"I would recommend that in the next few letters you tell Val that you love him. And no preaching—he's had plenty of that. Just tell him that you love him." Looking at Brother Whitt, Ray added, "You write him also."

"Oh, I leave that to Olivia to do," he responded sheepishly. "I have a hard time telling Val that I love him."

"Brother Whitt, have you ever told your son that you love him?"

Brother Whitt, eyes fixed on his feet, silently rubbed his weathered face with his large knurled hands. His voice broke as he replied, "I never heard my father say . . . that he loved me." Raising his head, his eyes moist, he continued, "I . . . I was never able to tell Val that I loved him. I was so proud of him I wanted to hug him and tell him . . . but I never could."

"Will you write to Val and tell him you love him?"

"I'll try."

"Oh, please do. He needs to hear from both of you that you love him. Remember, no preaching. And the next time you see Val, I want both of you to throw your arms around him and give him a hug. Sister Whitt, tell him it's payback for all the hugs he gave you years ago. He won't know what hit him."

As Ray rose to leave, he approached Brother Whitt with his arms extended, "Give me a hug."

Brother Whitt hesitated, unsure what to do, then gently wrapped his arms around Ray, who pushed away. "Let's try again. Pretend I'm a 200-pound bale of hay you're grabbing to throw on a truck."

This time, Ray could hardly breathe as Brother Whitt lifted him completely off the ground. The large man's kindness, strength, and love enveloped him. "Val needs to feel all this love," Ray said, then added, "please put me down so I can breathe again."

"I'm sorry," Brother Whitt said as he wiped his eyes.

"Don't be sorry! That was a perfect hug, a hug that said 'I love you' better than a thousand words."

Although Sister Whitt wouldn't hug Ray, she promised that she'd practice.

Later, as Ray drove down the Whitt's long country driveway, he noticed in his rear view mirror that they were already practicing their hugging.

CHAPTER 26

Ray surveyed the full chapel with a growing sense of apprehension. His sole source of comfort was Brother and Sister Whitt, sitting together on the front row. He didn't recognize anyone else but knew that at least two people would be praying for him. The telephone call months earlier from Brother Whitt had been a complete surprise. "Brother Neels, this is Walter Whitt."

Ray's first response had been to wonder what had gone wrong since his visit, but he replied positively, "Brother Whitt, what a pleasant surprise. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I've a question for you, but first I need to tell you about Val's visit last month. I still can't believe how much fun we had."

Ray relaxed, "Please tell me."

Brother Whitt was so excited that he almost tripped over his words. "Well, Olivia and I had discussed what we'd say to Val when we met him at the airport. We'd spent hours detailing the reasons we loved him and why we were excited for his visit. We'd each rehearsed a short greeting to say before we gave him a hug.

"When we got to the airport his plane had already arrived. He was staring at the baggage carousel but glanced up and saw us. Olivia couldn't contain herself and raced toward him. I wasn't going to let her beat me, so I started running also. People in front of us scattered.

Everyone was surprised to see two old folks charging down the concourse, but no one more than Val. Olivia threw her arms around him, pinning his arms to his side. Then I arrived and threw my arms around both of them. All three of us stood there

bawling. We were overjoyed because for the first time in 20 years we were hugging our son, not some gay man, but our talented, loving, wonderful son. I'm sure people were looking at us, but we didn't care; we kept bawling and whispering, 'I love you, I love you,' to each other.

"Val introduced us to his partner, George. When I shook his hand, I think I scared him. While they were in town, we had a wonderful time. Olivia even used your notebook example to try to explain what had changed."

Ray laughed, "Did Val understand?"

"I don't know if he understood or not, but I do know that we had a great time together. He knew that we'd changed and that our change was not dependent upon him changing. As you suggested, we loved him, and he knew it. We cried when they left. Several times, George said he wished his family was like ours. It's a good thing he didn't see us during Val's last visit."

Ray continued to laugh, "You're both awesome. Change is possible."

"Yes, it is. Even for us old dogs."

As they continued to talk, Ray offered silent thanks for the wonderful blessings God had given the Whitt family. While saying goodbye, Brother Whitt remembered why he'd called, "Could you speak about same-sex attraction in a training meeting?"

Ray still felt the fear in his stomach. Although he'd told Brother Whitt that he couldn't talk about his experiences with strangers, his friend had insisted. "I'm on the high council so I see the stake president regularly. After your visit with us, I finally told the president about Val. Surprisingly, he'd had several members of the stake recently visit with him about the same issue. He didn't know how to help them so he asked me to feel you out about instructing a few leaders on same-sex attraction."

Ray remembered insisting that he couldn't do it, but Brother Whitt was adamant. "Ray, you know that Olivia and I didn't address the issue in a healthy manner until you talked with us.

We need to start talking about same-sex attraction within the Church because the situation exists whether we address it or not. When we don't talk about the issue, parents reject their children and feel like failures. Nothing will change until people step forward and start talking to each other."

Ray had finally surrendered. Now, as he watched the cultural hall begin to fill, he felt a growing sense of apprehension. "A *few* leaders," he whispered, "What a joke." He offered a silent prayer, knowing he'd prepared the best he could.

After a short introduction from the stake president, Ray timidly stepped to the pulpit. Almost in a whisper he began, "Brothers and sisters, I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you. I've been asked to discuss ministering. Four or five years ago, the daughter of a close friend became pregnant out of wedlock. My friend and his wife were devastated when their daughter and her boyfriend sat down with them and said something like this: 'We've got good news and bad news—the good news is that we're getting married; the bad news is that we have to get married.'

"The parents didn't know what to do; they'd anticipated a temple marriage for each of their children. In desperation, they went to their bishop. Okay, brothers and sisters, how would you respond to them if they came to you?"

Several hands shot up.

"Go ahead," Ray said, pointing to a man on the second row.

"I'm Bishop Thompson," he began. "A dozen years ago as bishop in a neighboring state I faced a similar situation. The girl involved still lived with her parents in my ward so I started meeting with the couple. The boyfriend confessed to his bishop. With the young man's permission, the bishop called me. Because they were going to live with her parents, I met with them as they began the repentance process. I also met with the girl's parents to assist them in staying close to the Spirit.

"The Relief Society was a huge help. The mother was too embarrassed to invite anyone to the wedding and didn't want to hold a reception. I think she cried for a solid week. Her visiting

teachers helped her understand that those things happen in a world where people have agency, and that she wasn't to blame. The Relief Society helped the parents organize a simple wedding and reception. Several hundred friends and family were there to show support. During the ceremony, I challenged them to be worthy to attend the temple in a year.

"After the wedding, the elders quorum and Relief Society assigned good home teachers and visiting teachers to the couple. We gave them appropriate callings in the ward and involved them in temple preparation classes and ward activities. A year later, when they were sealed, the ordinance room was crowded with family and ward members."

Several others shared similar experiences before Ray continued. His voice was stronger now. "Thank you. It's obvious that in this stake you know how to minister. Let me give you another situation. A young man, home from his mission about six months, sits down with his parents and announces, 'Mom, Dad, . . . I'm gay.' The parents are devastated. They have no idea what to do. Desperate, they turn to the Church. Brothers and sisters, how would you respond to these parents?"

This time only one hand went up.

"Go ahead," Ray pointed to a man sitting near the rear of the chapel.

"Well," he began, "if he's a returned missionary, it means he's been through the temple. If he's gay, then he's broken temple covenants so it would be critical that a disciplinary council be held and appropriate action be taken."

"I realize that you don't know any details, but what kind of council action do you think would be appropriate?"

"I really don't know. I think he should at least be disfellowshipped and maybe he should be excommunicated."

"Thank you. Any other comments? Please go ahead," Ray encouraged a sister on his left.

"My sister-in-law lives in a large city where there are lots of gays. She said that a few weeks ago she saw a gay pride parade

that was revolting. She told me I was lucky to live in an area where there aren't any of those people."

"Thank you. Yes, go ahead."

A man in the cultural hall stood and spoke, "I'm not sure this is a subject that's worth our time discussing. While there may be some gays in town, I doubt there are any who are members of this stake."

"Thank you." Ray paused and wondered how this many people could be so blind. He wanted to scream at them to wake up, then remembered that just three short years ago he'd felt just like them. He took a deep breath, his voice again a whisper, "Brothers and sisters, a few years ago my second son, I'll call him Allen for this presentation, just six months off his mission, announced to my wife and me, 'Mom, Dad, . . . I'm gay.'"

Ray paused again, not sure he could continue. Emotionally exhausted, he lowered his head, then noticed Brother and Sister Whitt on the front row. He pictured them hugging their son in the airport. He knew that if they could do that, he could somehow share his experience, no matter how painful.

Silently pleading for strength, he raised his head, continued softly, "My wife and I . . . were totally unprepared for Allen's announcement. We felt this huge weight shift from his shoulders to ours. It crushed us. We blamed ourselves. Relationships in our immediate and extended family suffered. We felt helpless and hopeless. Our dreams of Allen being sealed in the temple and raising a family of righteous sons and daughters were dead. This was a crushing, unexpected loss, as if our son in the prime of his life had been cut down in a violent accident. Ironically, if Allen had died in an accident, our ward family would have provided overwhelming support, but because of our shame, we didn't tell anyone and we suffered alone.

"When Allen told us about himself, he mentioned that he'd been seeing the bishop. Knowing our bishop was aware of our situation, we felt comfortable approaching him. The bishop, though, confessed he didn't know how to help our son although

he did arrange for Allen to see a counselor. Our loving bishop wanted to help but didn't know what to do. Nor did he realize how much my wife and I were hurting. We left the bishop's office feeling worse than when we entered."

Ray looked at Bishop Thompson, "I couldn't help but compare the support my wife and I received to the support your ward gave to the pregnant young lady and her family. You were pro-active and rallied around them with love and support."

Ray paused and took a deep breath, glad he'd made it through the hardest part of his presentation. "I'd like to lay some groundwork for the remainder of our discussion. First, homosexuality is not a noun that describes a condition, such as 'He is homosexual.' It's an adjective, and it's appropriate to use it to describe feelings or behavior. Therefore, our brothers and sisters who face this issue are sons and daughters of God with homosexual feelings or attractions towards others of the same-sex.

"Remember that each of us is a child of a loving Father in Heaven. Each of us has struggles and challenges. Some of us may have physical handicaps, some may have addictions to alcohol or pornography, while others may have feelings of inadequacy or depression. And some few may have a challenge with attraction to others of the same sex. Some estimate that 3 to 5 percent of Church members have feelings of same-sex attraction." Turning to the stake president Ray inquired, "How many members are in your stake?"

He quickly responded, "Currently, around 3,400 members live in the stake."

Ray paused, made a quick calculation and continued, "If we use the lower figure of 3%, there are over 100 members of this stake with feelings of same-sex attraction. That may not be many, but those few affect countless others. By the show of hands, how many of you know of someone in your family or among your friends or acquaintances who experiences same-sex attraction?"

Ray, surprised at the number of hands that went up, was feeling more confident, "It appears that over half of you know

someone who is affected by this issue. Earlier, someone said this was not an issue in this stake. I'll share two experiences I hope will change your mind. Not far from where I live is an organization that provides information and support to those affected by this issue. They're not affiliated with the Church but support the teachings of the Church. Once a year they sponsor a conference for everyone who is touched by this issue.

"After our son told us about his attractions, my wife and I were certain we were the only family in our ward facing this situation. Our bishop felt the same way. When I attended my first conference, I was surprised to meet a member of my ward who had struggled with these attractions for the first thirty years of his life but had since left that lifestyle, married, and was rearing a wonderful family with his dear wife. He was a fellow high priest who'd home taught my family for years. After I got over my embarrassment, we had an enlightening conversation. He taught me things that would have helped my family when Allen came out. I now know of others in my ward and stake who experience same-sex attraction.

"The second experience took place in a college student stake. The stake president, who didn't feel same-sex attraction was a problem in his stake, was challenged to have his bishops mention the words 'same-sex attraction' and 'homosexuality' from the pulpit several times during the month. They weren't to make a big deal of the issue. In a follow-up visit months later, the stake president admitted that since the bishops had mentioned the words from their pulpits, they'd been busy counseling with ward members affected by the issue. There are members with these attractions in every ward and stake.

"As you counsel and work with your members, help them understand the difference between immoral thoughts and feelings and participating in immoral homosexual behavior. Homosexual behavior is a serious sin. Complete repentance for those engaged in this behavior may be long and arduous. Many times a Church disciplinary council will be necessary to assist a person in the repentance process.

"Please remember, though, that most people in your stake who face this issue are not involved in homosexual behavior but do experience attractions to others of the same sex. This is especially true among the youth of the Church. However, they begin to view their attractions and feelings as serious sin and to view themselves as vile sinners."

Ray took a drink of water and continued. "Inadvertently, we as leaders may compound their feelings of unworthiness. For example, my son told me that he thought his feelings towards men were much worse than if one of his friends committed fornication. When I asked him why, he said he'd always heard his priesthood and youth leaders talk about petting, pornography, fornication, and adultery, but he'd never heard them mention homosexuality. His leaders had also talked about repenting of heterosexual sins, but they'd never mentioned repenting of homosexual sins. In his mind, his sins were so horrible that neither God nor His Church ever mentioned them.

"My son felt from an early age that, because of his feelings, he was damned. At the same time that my son had convinced himself he was lost for eternity, other young men in the ward were engaged in sinful sexual behavior. Most of them were either not concerned about their behavior because 'everyone is doing it' or they were working with the bishop to repent. None of them felt eternally damned.

"Those who struggle with these feelings wonder where their attractions came from, but because the Church has said so little about the issue they look to the world for answers. From media, friends, and literature they begin to believe the world's propaganda that they were born homosexual.

"Whenever you talk to your youth about the law of chastity or other moral issues I encourage you include same-sex attraction." Immediately a hand went up.

Yikes, Ray gulped. He'd grown comfortable in talking about same-sex attraction with individuals or in a small group of people he knew. This was not a small group. Taking a deep breath, he

pointed to the man who immediately stood up. He spoke forcefully, "I don't agree with you. As a bishop, if a young man comes to me with this issue, I will lovingly and patiently counsel with him. But, I won't discuss homosexuality with all the youth. That will only put ideas into their heads and do more harm than good."

"I . . . um . . . will . . ." Ray stuttered. Unable to speak, he lowered his head, pleading for direction. As he opened his eyes, the words rolled out of his month. "That's a real concern, Bishop. But, based on that logic, you'd never talk to your youth about heterosexual morality either. That would only put ideas into their minds."

Ray surveyed the audience. "I have a question for all of you. If you as parents and Church leaders don't teach the youth of this stake the Lord's law of chastity, including same-sex attraction, who will teach them?"

Ray heard the whispered replies. Nodding in agreement he continued, "You're right. If *you* don't teach the youth the Lord's view of morality, they'll learn the world's view from their friends, the media, and people who will want to take advantage of them. As leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you have an obligation to patiently teach the Lord's law of chastity, including same-sex attraction. All members, but especially the youth, need to hear their leaders talk about same-sex attraction in a kind and compassionate way. As you do this, those who experience these attractions will feel more comfortable in sharing their burden with you.

"The Church has prepared materials that address this issue in a sensitive manner. As you study these materials, notice how naturally same-sex attraction is included in the sections on morality. The principles taught in the publications apply just as well to a young person struggling with heterosexual temptation as to a young person experiencing same-sex attraction. Use the publications to teach them that they are sons and daughters of a Father in Heaven who loves them. Teach them that they are not evil because of their attractions and feelings. Nonetheless, God

has commanded us to bridle all our passions and has provided the means for us to do so. It's important that each person understand that feelings, thoughts, and behavior can and must be controlled.

"Some may be born with a tendency to certain feelings or behavior. For example, some people seem quick to anger. If these tendencies or feelings of anger are not controlled, they can lead to unhealthy, violent, and illegal behavior. Although a person may struggle with tendencies to anger, he or she can be fully involved in the Church and if worthy can enjoy every blessing of the gospel. In the same way, worthy members experiencing same-sex attraction can serve in the Church, attend the temple, and enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost.

"Remember that those affected by this issue are not that much different than everyone else. For example, when my wife and I found out about our son, we suddenly had huge needs. But when we visited with the bishop, we spent the entire time talking about our son. We were either too embarrassed about our situation or too naive about our needs to even talk about them. After the first visit, we went home and cried. After several visits, we did begin to talk about ourselves. The bishop indicated he had never talked to anyone who faced this challenge so didn't know how to counsel us." Ray paused, then looked at the bishop who had previously shared his experience. "Bishop Thompson, what did you tell the parents of the young woman who had to get married?"

Bishop Thompson stood and faced the audience, "I think the most important counsel I gave them was to have faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice. I reminded them that Christ understood their situation and that He could lift their burdens. He could give them peace. I told them to love their daughter, to keep communications with her open, to hold her close, and to not give up on her. I counseled them to fast and pray, study the scriptures, and keep the Spirit in their lives. I encouraged them to attend church, partake of the sacrament, and attend the

temple. I reminded them that God knew their daughter better than they did, and if they humbly sought direction, He would guide them in their efforts to love and support her. I had to tell them time and time again not to blame themselves."

"Thank you, Bishop," Ray said sincerely, grateful for an inspired bishop. He surveyed the audience, "What you just heard is excellent counsel for parents who have just found out their daughter is pregnant. It's also excellent counsel for anyone who has found out that a loved one has feelings of same-sex attraction. I encourage you, as shepherds of your flock, to visit often with parents, spouse, friends, and family of those who feel same-sex attraction. Just listen to them. They need to talk about their feelings, but they are often too embarrassed or ashamed to talk to family or friends.

"Those of you who work with the youth must build a personal relationship with each young man and young woman under your care. Get to know their individual dreams, concerns, and fears; understand what makes them tick. Be a friend. Help the youth reach their personal goals. Find a passion, talent, or interest that each youth has and provide opportunity for them to share it with others. Don't assume that every young man loves to play basketball.

"Strive to have a varied, well-rounded youth program. Build activities and learning experiences around dance, drama, photography, writing, biking, serving the disabled, hiking, communicating, cooking, social skills, family history, missionary service, sewing, athletics, music, competition, testimony, crafts, and more. I hope you notice I didn't differentiate between Young Men and Young Women activities. Girls can get dirt on their hands and grass stains on their knees. Boys need to learn to sew, cook, and clean, if for no other reason than to prepare for missions. All youth can be blessed through a greater appreciation of the arts, through feeling greater compassion for others, through better social skills, and through more sensitivity to the Spirit.

"If a young man shares his struggles with you, listen. Don't say you know how he feels unless you really do. But you can point out that Jesus Christ does know how he feels. He has felt his pain, his fears, and his loneliness. Help him to trust in the Lord. Don't give simplistic answers or promise quick fixes. Remember that the young man visiting with you has already done everything in his power to change his feelings and attractions. Help him to understand the importance of prayer, fasting, scripture study, and controlling his thoughts. He needs your loving support and confidence. He may make decisions you don't understand, but don't cut the lines of communication."

Ray took another drink of water and then held up the glass for all to see. "This water is not only refreshing but necessary for survival. To a young man experiencing same-sex attraction, you may become a glass of life-sustaining water. Don't allow him to deal with his struggles alone. Encourage him to share his feelings with his parents. Remember that he's shared a dark secret with you. Don't betray his confidence. Talk with him before involving others. Continue to remind him that his attractions do not make him unworthy.

"Don't allow the young man to isolate himself. Keep him involved in every way possible. Leaders of the Church have taught that if a person is living according to the commands, then he is worthy to attend the temple, enjoy the blessings of the Atonement, and serve in the Church. As the Spirit directs, involve the young man in appropriate Church callings. Work with him, as you would work with any other young man, to prepare to receive his own endowments and to serve a full-time mission.

"Counseling can be an invaluable help to both those experiencing same-sex attraction and their family and friends. LDS Family Services can answer many of your questions and direct you to counselors or therapists qualified to assist individuals experiencing unwanted homosexual attractions.

"I've prepared a handout of articles and other Church resources that address this issue. Most of the articles relate directly to same-

sex attraction; others are powerful testimonies of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice. On the handout, I've also included information about the organization I mentioned earlier—it is not affiliated with the Church but is very supportive of Church teachings on same-sex attraction. They have excellent information and resources for individuals, families, and leaders."

Ray bore his testimony and sat down, relieved. As the stake president shared some final thoughts on the subject, Ray quickly reviewed the handout he had prepared.

Selected Readings on Same Gender Attractions

"Becoming Whole Again," *Ensign*, January 1997, 27

"But If Not . . .," *Ensign*, May 2004, 73 (Elder Simmons)

"Compassion for Those Who Struggle," *Ensign*, September 2004, 58

"Covenants," *Ensign*, November 1990, 84 (Elder Packer)

"Divine Love," *Ensign*, February 2003, 20 (Elder Nelson)

"He Heals the Heavy Laden," *Ensign*, November 2006, 6 (Elder Oakes)

"Helping Those Who Struggle with Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign*, October 2007, 42 (Elder Holland)

"Letting Go Without Giving Up," *Ensign*, September 2002, 8

"Hope for Parents of Wayward Children," 11 (see also "Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered," *Ensign*, April 2003, 61 (President Faust)

"My Battle with Same-Sex Attraction," *Ensign*, August 2002, 49

"Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign*, October 1995, 7 (Elder Oaks)

"The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign*, May 2004, 97 (Elder Hafen)

"To Help a Loved One in Need," *Ensign*, May 1988, 60 (Elder Scott)

"What Are People Asking about Us?" *Ensign*, November 1998, 71 (President Hinckley)

"When a Loved One Struggles with Same-Sex Attraction," *Ensign*, September 1999, 51

"When Our Children Go Astray," *Ensign*, February 1997, 7 (Elder Carmack)

Interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Lance B. Wickman on Same-Gender Attraction, www.newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/public-issues/same-sex-attraction

Pamphlet, *God Loveth His Children* (Order from Church Distribution Center, item number 04824, no charge)

Evergreen International, www.evergreeninternational.org

Ray laid the page down. He knew the materials had helped him. He hoped they would be of help to others. The stake president thanked Ray and encouraged those with additional questions to visit with Ray following the prayer.

As Ray stood to leave, people with questions and comments surrounded him. He answered each question as best he could. One man confided that he'd felt the attractions in his own life and was grateful to have the issue discussed more openly. When Ray pulled out of the parking lot two hours later, he was relieved to have the experience behind him. *Same-sex attraction is not an issue in this stake,* he thought to himself with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 27

"Happy New Year, David," Ray exclaimed, extending his hand. "How are you this first Sunday of the year?"

"I'm well, and you?"

"Good. Did you have an enjoyable New Year's celebration?"

"It was pleasant," David smiled. "Dan and his partner surprised us with a visit."

"How's Dan doing? Is he close to graduating?"

"He's getting along okay. He still has a year or two before graduation."

"And how's his partner?" Ray asked. "Wasn't his name Steve?"

"You're right! I'm impressed with your memory. It was Steve. But Steve and Dan broke up after their visit last summer. Dan was with Timothy last week. You know, I hated to see him break up with Steve. I liked him. Dan's struggled to maintain a long-term relationship with anyone."

"That's the Church's fault!"

David and Ray turned to face Mitt, who had quietly walked up behind them.

After the customary greetings and handshakes, Ray turned to Mitt, "I think I know the answer, but what's the Church's fault?"

Mitt grumbled, "It's the Church's fault that our sons can't maintain long-term relationships. If the Church would recognize some form of same-sex marriage, our sons would be able to form committed, monogamous relationships. Better yet, if our sons could be sealed in the temple their relationships could be eternal."

Ray paused before replying, "We've talked about this before. It's illogical to seal two men or two women for eternity."

"But it'll happen someday."

"I don't think so," Ray responded. "I once heard a visiting authority say there'll never be a family group sheet with two men sealed to each other. He said there aren't men holding hands in heaven, looking into each other's eyes, waiting to be sealed. Same goes for women."

David waved at his wife, "I can see this will be a great discussion, but Nancy's calling, I've got to go."

"Have a good day," Mitt commanded, then turned to Ray. "Shows how little your visiting authority understands. I think it'll happen."

"Why?"

"The Church will be forced to change, as it was forced to change on blacks holding the priesthood."

"You really think the Church caved in to pressure when the blacks received the priesthood?"

"Yes."

"I don't agree," Ray countered with a shake of his head. "Say, the other ward is in sacrament meeting—why don't we use that empty classroom so we won't be interrupted? Then you can tell me what you think promoted the revelation."

As they sat down, Mitt began, "In the early 1960s, Elder Spencer W. Kimball visited South America. He was concerned about the number of faithful members who couldn't receive the priesthood because of their race. At the same time, the Church began to receive letters from people in Africa who wanted to be baptized. And, of course, there was pressure from the civil rights movement in this country."

"You're partially correct," Ray countered. "For more than a year before the revelation was received, President Kimball focused intently on the issue. He recognized the contradiction between restrictions on the priesthood and his own challenge for members to pray that all nations be opened to the preach-

ing of the gospel. Finally, with a temple in Sao Paulo, Brazil, nearing completion, he was concerned about the challenge of determining temple worthiness. Pressure from activists was not an issue. Although he felt that the time for change might be near, if God had continued the existing policies regarding the priesthood, President Kimball was willing to defend that position to his death. His only concern was to do what God revealed.

"President Kimball spent many hours in an upper room of the temple in private prayer and meditation. He discussed the issue with his counselors and members of the Twelve. On the day the revelation was received, the First Presidency and the members of the Quorum of the Twelve had gone to the temple fasting. As they joined in prayer with President Kimball as the voice, the revelation came.

"Mitt, I've read several accounts of the experience. Each account talked about the 'Spirit of God,' 'the voice of the Spirit' or 'the voice of God.' All in the room received the same spiritual manifestation. Some of those present later said the event was of greater spiritual magnitude and power than anything they'd ever experienced."

"My wife called me at work to tell me about the announcement," Mitt remembered.

"That's how I heard about the change. When did you receive a witness that the revelation was from God?"

"I haven't thought about that before," Mitt replied slowly. "But I did receive a witness regarding the revelation—it was during general conference in September."

"The Spirit bore the same witness to me. Okay, now about polygamy." Ray opened his scriptures and continued, "A year after the revelation that discontinued the practice of polygamy, President Woodruff gave an address in Cache Valley. He described a vision from God that showed him what would have happened if the Saints had continued practicing polygamy. In the vision, he saw that all the temples would be closed, all ordinances for the living and the dead would be stopped, he

and others would be thrown into prison, and confusion would reign in Zion. The whole mission and work of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would have stopped.

"Let me quote, 'I saw exactly what would come to pass if there was not something done. . . . It was all clear to me. I went before the Lord, and I wrote what the Lord told me to write.' Mitt, did you catch that? 'I wrote what the Lord told me to write.'"

Mitt nodded.

"By revelation through His living prophet, God instructed the Church to stop the practice of plural marriage. President Woodruff was quick to add that if the revelation had been different, he was willing to go to prison. His only interest was to do what God commanded. On the day the Manifesto was presented, President Woodruff said, 'The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray. It is not—"

"I've got a problem with that statement," Mitt interrupted. "It makes the prophet infallible, and no man is infallible."

"I think you're misreading the statement," Ray responded. "President Woodruff is freely admitting he could try to lead the Church astray. But, President Woodruff continued, 'If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place, and so He will any other man who attempts to lead the children of men astray from the oracles of God and from their duty.' To me, he's saying that God is the infallible one, and He will not allow the prophet to mislead the Church in regards to polygamy. So do you agree that God does not make mistakes? Would an infallible God allow our current prophet to lead us astray?"

Mitt sighed, "No, but how do we know that the Brethren aren't in the temple right now, praying about our homosexual sons and daughters?"

"We don't know. But remember that the revelation on polygamy and the revelation on the priesthood didn't change existing gospel doctrine."

"What do you mean?"

Ray flipped through his scriptures, "In Jacob, chapter 2, the Lord commanded men to have one wife, but verse 30 prefigures polygamy as a possibility: 'For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people.'

"In regards to blacks and the priesthood—since the Restoration, apostles and prophets had taught that someday all worthy males would be able to hold the priesthood. The only question was *when*, not *if*, the priesthood would be available to all God's sons.

"In regards to homosexuality—no apostle or prophet has ever taught that two men or two women will be sealed together. The prophets have taught that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God. Only a man and a woman have the power to provide physical bodies for Father in Heaven's spirit children. Families are the basic unit of the Church and of society. When parents and children are sealed in the temple, the family will endure throughout eternity. All this is part of God's great plan of salvation."

"That leaves our sons on the outside, damned for all eternity," Mitt whispered.

Ray closed his eyes and sensed his own emotions rising, "I know. Remember, I have a son on the outside too. Like you, I've seen the pain in his face and the tears in his eyes." Wiping his own eyes, Ray testified, "I trust in the prophet's promise that Eli isn't damned for eternity, as you put it. I believe that someday Eli can receive every blessing God has promised His obedient children."

Mitt exhaled, "I'm not willing to wait for some future day. Tony has a right to every blessing now."

Ray simply shook his head and continued, "There are other examples of God directing change within His kingdom. Do you want to look at one more?"

"Sure, why not," Mitt replied condescendingly.

Ray looked skeptically at Mitt but continued, "Tell me about Cornelius."

"He was a centurion who became a Christian."

"That's right." Ray opened his Bible, "In Acts chapter 10 we read that Cornelius was a devout man. During prayer one day, he received a vision instructing him to send for Simon Peter in Joppa. The next day, as his servants arrived in Joppa, Peter himself was receiving a vision. He saw a sheet full of animals let down from heaven and was told to kill and eat the animals. He refused because he'd never eaten any unclean thing. Then God pointed out that what He'd cleansed was no longer unclean. What was God teaching Peter?"

"That the Gospel could go to the Gentiles, as well as the Jews."

"That's right. And this instruction was in harmony with Christ's previous command to His apostles to 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations.' After Peter had finished visiting with Cornelius, he responded, 'Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.'"

"Including our sons," Mitt added.

"That's true," Ray agreed. "The next verse says, 'But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.' Peter then taught the gentiles, and the Holy Ghost fell on them.

"Mitt, notice how the Spirit was involved in the entire process: first, directing Cornelius, then teaching Peter, and finally bearing witness to the Jews that the gentiles were worthy to be baptized. In the next chapter of Acts, Peter explained to the church in Jerusalem how the Spirit directed all that happened. That same spirit witnessed to the Jews that the gentiles could have faith in Jesus Christ, repent, be baptized, and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

"So what's your point?" demanded Mitt.

"There are two points," Ray replied. "First, God oversaw and directed through His Spirit all that happened—God was in charge, not man. Second, the Gentiles were held to the same basic principles and ordinances of the gospel as the Jews. There

were no adjustments to the doctrines of salvation to accommodate the Gentiles. The Jews in Jerusalem, after being taught by the Spirit, understood the same truth: 'When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.' Mitt, I believe that, even today, God is no respecter of persons, and to those who experience same-sex attractions He has indeed 'granted repentance unto life.'

"Mitt, we both know it's easy to diagram the plan of salvation—the circles that represent our pre-earth existence, this earth, the degrees of glory, and the lines that represent birth, death, judgment, and resurrection. The question is then, how and where do our sons fit into the plan?"

Mitt glared at Ray, "The answer is that they don't fit into the plan. The Church needs to change to include all of our children."

Unfazed by Mitt's scowl, Ray continued, "I disagree. The Church has no need to change. Our sons can enjoy every blessing Father in Heaven has promised to His righteous children. They fit into His merciful plan like all His other children who are on the earth. All have been sent here to gain a body, to be tested, to have experiences, and to begin the process of becoming worthy to return and live with God. All are held to the same standard of obedience. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all have the ability and the opportunity to repent. All have an opportunity to be part of an eternal family comprised of a father, a mother, and children. Because of the infinite mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, all of God's children can return and live with Him."

"So," Mitt whispered, "you're saying there's no special treatment for our sons, even though they face a unique situation?"

"Personally, I don't think any of God's children will receive special treatment. Within the plan of salvation—everyone will be treated equally and all will be 'granted repentance unto life.'"

Standing, Mitt started to pace back and forth, "The Church has never treated my son as an equal citizen."

"That's where *you're* wrong, Mitt. Right now our sons are equal to every other member of the Church. But if the Church changed its doctrine as you propose, our sons would be unequal to other members forever."

"That's where you're wrong. If Tony and his partner were sealed in the temple, they'd finally be equal."

Ray shook his head, "They'd be unequal for all eternity. A righteous man and woman, sealed in the temple, can have eternal increase. Through that increase, they can progress eternally and become like Heavenly Father. If Tony and his partner were sealed in the temple, they could never enjoy eternal increase or progression. The doctrine of the Church allows our sons to reach their highest potential, as husbands and fathers, throughout eternity. Faith in this doctrine fills us with hope. Mitt, belief in the world's propaganda about homosexuality destroys hope."

Mitt slammed the table with his fist, "But our sons aren't equal. That has to change! And Ray, it's going to change, the Spirit has told me so."

"That's crazy."

"The prophet isn't listening. The Spirit has to speak to someone in order for change to happen."

"Mitt, when you were bishop did you receive revelation to help you direct the affairs of your ward?"

"Yes, I did."

"During that same time did you ever receive revelation in regards to the affairs of the stake?"

"No, the stake wasn't my responsibility."

"Then how can you say you've received revelation that effects the entire Church—that's not your responsibility?"

"Because the Church is wrong," Mitt settled back into his chair.

"Why doesn't God reveal that to the prophet?"

"The prophet isn't listening."

"Tell me about Hiram Page."

"Hiram Page?" Mitt skeptically questioned. "He received revelation through a stone."

Ray turned to the Doctrine and Covenants, "Hiram claimed to have received revelation for the Church, and several members, including Oliver Cowdery, believed him. The Lord, through Joseph Smith, instructed Oliver to talk to Hiram and tell him that what he'd received wasn't from God and that, 'Satan deceiveth him.' Mitt, you've been deceived."

"That's crazy."

Ray chuckled, "It's obvious that we're not going to change how each other feels. Mitt, you're like a brother to me. For a while I chose to follow your voice in regards to same-sex attraction. Now I look to God's prophet as a safer, surer, more consistent voice to follow. I was hoping I could convince you to follow him also."

"Ray, you disappoint me. I thought you loved Eli more than that."

"Mitt, it's *because* of my love for Eli and for Jesus Christ that I've chosen to follow the prophet."

Mitt stood, "We make our choices and we live with the consequences for eternity. But you're right about one thing, Ray—one of us, either you or I, has been deceived."

CHAPTER 28

"What do you think?" Ray asked apprehensively.

Roberta didn't answer immediately. She looked around, still on her guard, "I think things will work out; I'm still a bit jumpy, though."

"That's to be expected," Ray responded reassuringly. "But I figured we ought to use the coupons we so painfully earned last time. You must admit, this April weather is much more pleasant than the April weather of three years ago. That cruise was a disaster."

"Please don't remind me," Roberta replied in feigned horror, then added seriously, "I never, ever want to go through another experience like that again."

"I agree, Sweetie. Eli's letter on our previous cruise opened a Pandora's Box of trials that I didn't think we'd ever get through.

"I'm not sure we're through everything yet," Roberta sighed. "We may still have challenges ahead of us. But, we've been blessed, and we've grown. At first, I thought that our challenges had everything to do with Eli's same-sex attraction. Turns out our trials had everything to do with faith in Jesus Christ. We've made it here today because of Him."

"On this cruise ship?" Ray asked with a laugh.

"Yes, on this cruise ship," Roberta replied with a tinge of irony in her voice. "You know, you broke your vow to never set foot on another cruise ship."

"I did, but I repented," Ray sheepishly replied. "I've done a lot of repenting the past few years. Did you bring any letters from the children this time?"

"I did. I have a letter from each of the children."

Ray spun around and glared at his wife, "Really?"

"Really."

"Don't read them!" he commanded. "Throw them overboard right now!"

"Never," Roberta replied, attempting to hide her smile. "The letters are addressed to you, and you're going to read every one of them."

"I refuse," Ray replied emphatically. Then noticing her smile, he cautiously asked, "What's so funny?"

"You are. You look like you've seen a ghost. Don't worry, I asked the children to write to you about the positive changes they've seen in your life. They were happy to do it."

Ray exhaled, "Thank you."

"You do realize that for a while you were hard to live with? You've come a long way though."

"Sorry," Ray apologized sincerely. "I tried to respond to Eli's same-sex attraction on my own, and I failed."

"Things are a lot better now," Roberta observed." The bon voyage party last night was fun."

"It was. Every member of the family was there, including your parents. And I think everyone had fun. The food was good, especially the casserole and the dessert."

"My mother made the casserole," Roberta responded with some pride, "and Eli made the dessert."

"Speaking of Eli, I witnessed a miracle last night when your dad hugged him."

"It was a miracle—an example of the power of the Spirit to transform a person's heart. When I started crying for joy, Ted asked me what was wrong. When I told him about Eli and my dad, he smiled and gave me a bear hug, which only made me cry more."

Laughing, Ray observed, "He grew more compassionate on his mission."

"He did, but he's also made an effort to see the good in his brother. I think he really loves Eli."

Ray nodded in agreement, "We spent a lot of time and effort trying to keep the family together. At times, I became so discouraged I felt like giving up. But last night was wonderful; it was worth all the effort."

"Ted isn't the only one who's changed. Everyone's heart has been affected and softened in some way."

"Including mine," Ray admitted. "Although my mother still feels we don't love Eli the way we should."

Roberta laughed, "And my parents continue to feel we're far too supportive of Eli and his lifestyle."

"I'm glad we don't need to please our parents, or Mitt, or the gay rights advocates, or even Eli. As long as we please God, everything else seems to fall into place." Ray noticed his wife wince at his observation, and he quickly added a postscript, "God hasn't removed all our challenges, but He has given us the strength to endure."

Roberta smiled.

For a while, they both looked out to sea, grateful for the blue sky and calm water. "Honey," Ray spoke softly so as not to destroy the spirit of the moment, "What do you think has brought us to this point?"

Roberta continued to gaze out to sea. Not sure that she had heard the question, Ray was about to ask again. "I think," she said without turning, "I think my faith in Jesus Christ has been the key for me. What about you?"

Without hesitation, Ray replied, "Like you, my faith in Jesus Christ, trying to always remember Him, to love as He loves."

They wandered around the cruise ship, holding hands, enjoying the time together. Finally, they settled onto a large lounge chair and simply watched people pass. Life had never felt better. On the previous cruise, they'd wanted to do and see everything. Now just being together was enough. As Roberta closed her eyes Ray observed, "I've seen several homosexual couples on the boat. You know, like we saw on our first cruise."

Roberta slowly opened her eyes, "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Always say something to me just as I'm falling asleep."

Ray objected, "I don't always do that."

"Yes, you do!"

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "I'll be quiet. Go back to sleep."

"I'm awake now. What were you going to say about the homosexual couples?"

"When I saw them on the first cruise," Ray began, "I didn't understand anything about them. I judged them harshly and wanted to stay as far away from them as I could."

"And you feel differently today?"

"You know I do. There's still a lot I don't understand, but I now know that each man is a son of God. Each man has his own dreams and challenges, like everyone else."

She rolled her eyes, "That was deep, Ray. Can I sleep now?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

* * *

Ray was busy writing when he heard Roberta, "Are we there yet?"

"To the celestial kingdom?"

Roberta playfully punched his arm, "No, the port."

"We're closer than we were when you fell asleep." Ray paused, then slowly continued, "I read the letters the children wrote; I didn't realize how my response to one child affected the other children."

"Or how your struggles affected your wife. What are you writing?"

"A list of principles that helped me get back on track."

"What's the first principle?" she queried.

"We talked about it before your nap—faith in Jesus Christ. The second principle is that parents must live so the Spirit can be their constant companion. And they must have the courage to follow the promptings of the Spirit. Want to guess the third principle?"

"Sure, how about—there's a prophet on the earth today who speaks for God? The best thing parents can do, both for themselves and for their children, is to follow the voice of the prophet."

"You're amazing, Honey. My fourth principle deals with agency. We all have agency. I can't take your agency away and I can't change you; I can change only myself. I need to focus on the things in my own life that the Spirit directs me to work on."

Roberta nodded, "We both had to learn that lesson."

"The fifth principle is to love as Christ loves. If we're going to love Eli as Christ would love him, we must have the Spirit to guide us. If we love him on our own, our love will be Raylike or Robertalike, but not Christlike."

Roberta laughed, "Raylike love, now that's a scary thought. Those principles worked for us, but will they work for others?"

"Absolutely," Ray insisted. "They're basic principles of the gospel. They would be of value to parents of any child who has a challenge."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

Ray chuckled, "During the last three years, I've learned that I don't know as much as I thought I did. But I do know that it's important to have faith in Jesus Christ and to follow the Spirit. I also know that life's not black and white, but a thousand shades of gray. I'm finally beginning to love the gray in my life."

"I still like the old black-and-white world," Roberta said. "But with God's help I'm learning to understand the gray, especially the gray surrounding same-sex attraction. Recently the Church has prepared some good materials to help. There's no reason for an active member of the Church to be misled by the half-truths of the world."

"Amen to that!" Ray stood up and took Roberta's hand. "Let's go see what excitement this ship has to offer."

They wandered from one end of the cruise ship to the other, laughing and greeting the passengers they encountered. They

didn't find anything they wanted to do until they rounded a corner on an upper deck. Roberta squeezed her husband's hand, "Oh, Ray, this looks like our own deserted island." They stood in front of a large expanse of brilliant white sand surrounded by potted plants and small trees. Empty tables and chairs were scattered among the vegetation.

"It looks like it was made just for us," Ray observed, "complete with volleyball and horse shoes."

"Challenge you to a game of horseshoes!" Roberta yelled, kicking off her sandals.

Ray rolled his eyes, "It wasn't pretty the last time we played horseshoes. This may not be the best way to start our vacation together. Let's play tomorrow."

"Why, I think you're afraid!" Roberta exclaimed. "You're afraid that you'll lose like you did at the picnic last year."

"You only won because John was on your team. I'd hate to beat you and ruin our cruise."

"As if that's a problem. You men have such fragile egos."

"Now you've attacked my manhood," Ray hissed with feigned anger. "You'd better watch out!"

"Oooh, I'm so scared," she responded, cowering in mock fear.

"You're in trouble now," Ray stooped to grab a handful of sand.

"Whoa, big boy. Read the sign."

Ray looked in the direction Roberta was pointing. He hadn't noticed the sign, which he saw specifically prohibited kicking or throwing sand. "Alright, you win," Ray said in mock defeat. "I'll whip you at horseshoes if that's the way you want it. But wouldn't it be more fun if we can get others to play with us."

"How about those two guys by the railing?"

Ray squinted, "The tall one sure looks familiar. I wonder where I've seen him before."

"If you weren't so old you could remember," Roberta teased. "See if you can place him while I go get them."

"You do that!" Ray yelled at her quickly receding figure. Turning, he looked out over the ocean. He couldn't remember when he'd felt more at ease, or more sure that God was pleased with the direction of his life. Bowing his head he prayed, "Father in Heaven, I thank Thee for this moment, for Thy Son, for His grace and mercy in my life. I thank Thee for everything that has brought me to this point." The tropical sun bore down on his back, but he felt a more satisfying warmth in his bosom. "Father, help me to share the peace and love I feel with others." He heard footsteps, "Like these two men."

He turned as Roberta spoke, "Guys, this is my husband, Ray. Ray, this is John and his friend Mark."

"Good to meet you," Ray said shaking hands. "Glad you could join us."

"Glad you invited us," replied Mark, the taller of the two. "We were getting bored looking at the ocean."

"But not as bored as shopping with our wives," interjected John.

Ray smiled at himself, then laughed aloud, "Kiss your boredom goodbye. When Roberta plays horseshoes, anything can happen."

"Get ready to lose," Roberta shouted, kicking sand in his direction. "And for that comment, you get to walk to the far end."

Now it was Ray's turn to point, "Remember the sign, Honey." He turned to Mark, "Want to walk with me?"

"Sure."

Ray headed for the far end at his normal brisk pace, Mark right behind him. "Is this your first cruise?" he asked Mark.

"No, my wife and I were on a cruise three years ago."

"Fun?"

"Not really. The weather was horrible. The captain cut the cruise short."

When Ray suddenly stopped and turned, Mark's forward motion knocked him to the ground.

"Sorry," Mark apologized as he helped Ray up.

"It was my fault for not signaling," Ray laughed as he brushed sand out of his hair. "I do have a question for you."

"What's your question?"

"Was your cruise the first week of April?"

"It was," Mark answered. "How'd you know?"

"I think we were on the same boat."

He stared at Ray, "That's crazy. What was the name . . . ?

The End

NOTES

Chapter 3

18 Christ told the adulterous woman: see John 8:1-11.

Chapter 8

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Chapter 9

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94 the Spirit can teach you all things: see John 14:26.

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99 ". . . they were ashamed, because . . .": 1 Nephi 8:28.

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115 "Peace I leave with you . . .": John 14:27.

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Chapter 18

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142 "do in *remembrance* of my body . . .": 3 Nephi 18:7; emphasis added.

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Chapter 23

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Chapter 28

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Ray closed his eyes and spoke slowly, "Anyway, the answer to Eli thinking he's homosexual is to sit down and reason with him."

Roberta's quiet words interrupted his thoughts, "And while we're reasoning with him, how should we treat him?"

"He's our son, isn't he? And, we love him . . . don't we?"

"That's right," she smiled, "We do love him; we'll follow the Savior's example and love him."

"We'll love him while we help him sort through his feelings; we'll love him more than he's ever been loved."

Roberta looked apprehensively at her husband. "What if he really is gay?"

Ray rubbed his furrowed brow, slowly shook his head, "Then he's out of the house. No gay man is going to live in my house, even if he is my son."

However, nothing goes according to plan. Eli, with support from family and friends, moves forward. His father, Ray, struggles with overwhelming feelings of loneliness, guilt, and failure. Ray quickly learns there are hundreds of voices speaking the "truth" about homosexuality. Authoritative voices encourage him to love his son unconditionally, even if it means abandoning his lifelong beliefs. Pragmatic voices preach fairness, tolerance, scientific evidence, and civil rights, while, loving, soothing voices offer acceptance and support.

But even in the midst of the overwhelming din, Ray can't escape the quiet whisperings of his soul that there is a living prophet, whose voice cannot be ignored.

In this engaging novel, first-time author, Tony Clarke, shares the heart-breaking but ultimately triumphant story of one LDS father's journey of discovery. Offering deep insight and practical suggestions for responding with faith and charity to a loved one who experiences same-sex attraction, this is a must read for every individual who has been touched by the issue.

TONY CLARKE is a lifelong member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For over a decade he has been associated with men and women who experience same-sex attraction and with their families.

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